



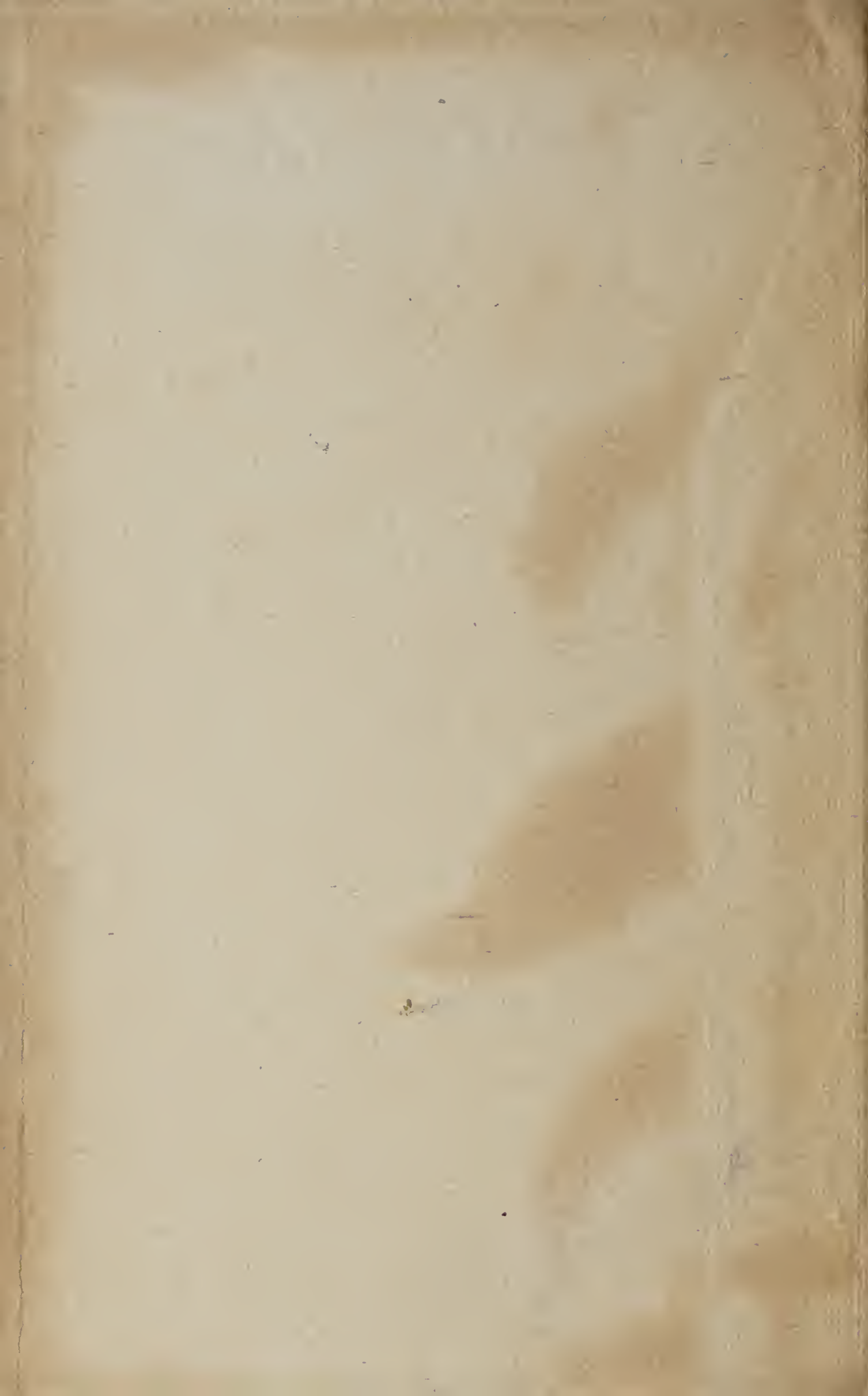
BERYL

of the

BIPLANE

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

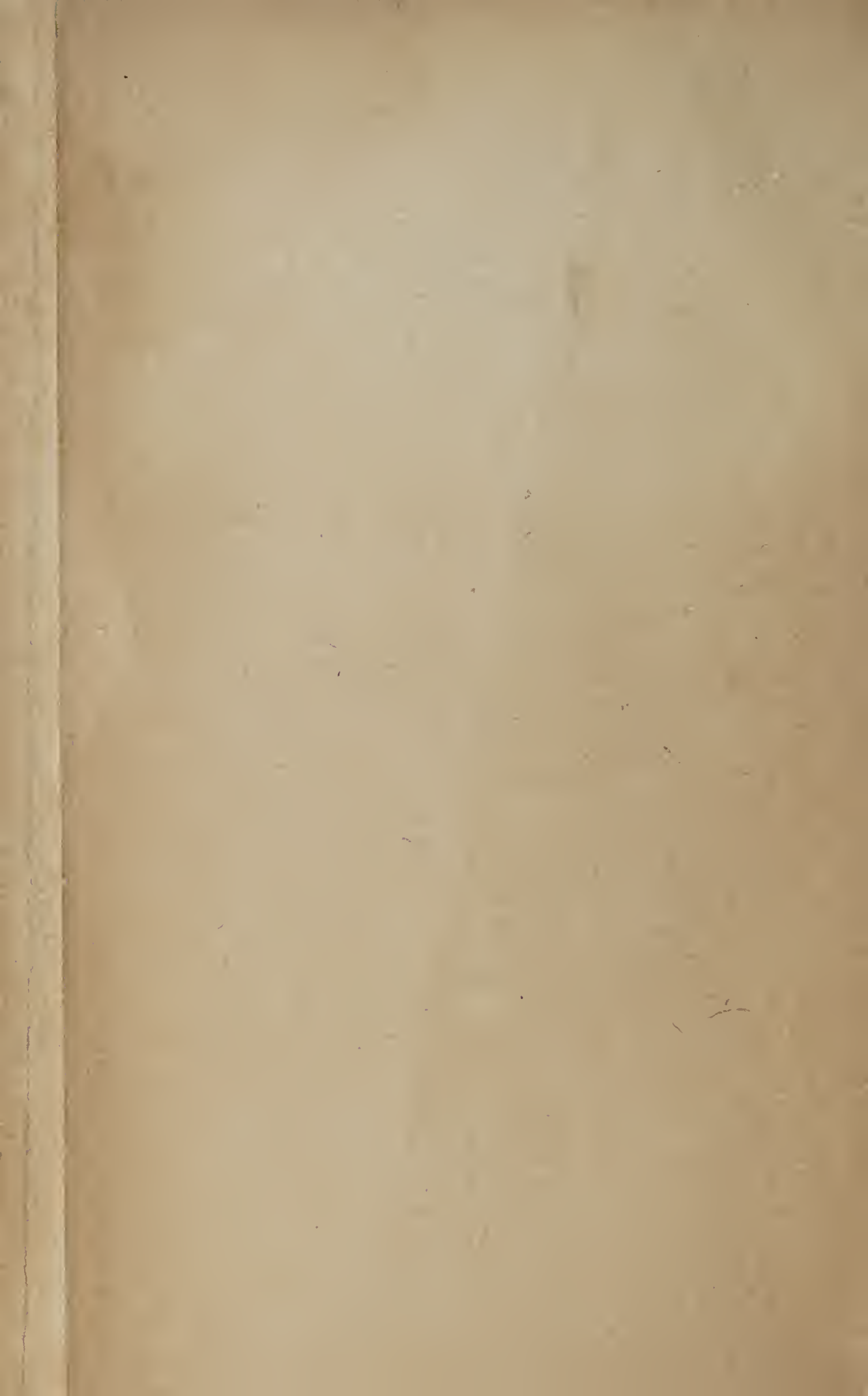


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BERYL OF THE BIPLANE

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BERYL OF THE BIPLANE

Being the Romance of an Air-woman of To-day

BY

WILLIAM LE QUEUX

LONDON

C. ARTHUR PEARSON, LIMITED

HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.

1917

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BERYL OF THE BIPLANE

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS NUMBER SEVEN.

“ARE you flying ‘The Hornet’ to-night?”

“I expect so.”

“You were up last night, weren’t you? Mac told me so at Brooklands this morning.”

“Yes—Zepp-hunting. I was up three hours, but, alas! had no luck. Two came in over Essex but were scared by the anti-aircraft boys, and turned tail. Better luck to-night, I hope,” and Ronald Pryor, the tall, dark, good-looking young man in grey flannels, laughed merrily as, with a quick movement, he flicked the ash from his after-luncheon cigarette.

His companion, George Bellingham, who was in the uniform of the Royal Flying Corps, wearing the silver wings of the pilot, was perhaps three years his senior, fair-haired, grey-eyed, with a small sandy moustache trimmed to the most correct cut.

Passers-by in Pall Mall on that June afternoon no doubt wondered why Ronald Pryor was not in khaki. As a matter of fact, the handsome, athletic young fellow had already done his bit—and done it with very great honour and distinction.

Before the war he had been of little good to society, it is true. He had been one of those modern dandies whose accomplishments include

an elegant taste in socks—with ties to match—and a critical eye for an ill-cut pair of trousers. Eldest son of a wealthy bank-director, Ronnie Pryor had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. After his career at Oxford, his father, Henry Pryor, who lived mostly at his beautiful old place, Urchfont Hall, a few miles out of Norwich, had given him an ample allowance. He had lived in a bachelor flat in Duke Street, St. James's, and spent several gay years about town with kindred souls of both sexes, becoming a familiar object each night at the supper-tables of the Savoy, the Carlton, or the Ritz.

This wild oat sowing had, however, been brought to an abrupt conclusion in a rather curious manner.

One Saturday afternoon he had driven in a friend's car over to the Aerodrome at Hendon, and had there witnessed some graceful flying. He had instantly become "bitten" by the sport, and from that moment had devoted himself assiduously to it.

Four months later he had taken his "ticket" as a pilot, and then, assisted by capital from his indulgent father, had entered business by establishing the well-known Pryor Aeroplane Factory at Weybridge, with a branch at Hendon, a business in which his companion, Flight-Lieutenant George Bellingham, of the Royal Flying Corps, had been, and was still, financially interested.

That Ronnie Pryor—as everyone called him—was a handsome fellow could not be denied. His was a strongly marked personality, clean-limbed, with close-cut dark hair, a refined aquiline face, and that slight contraction of the

eyebrows that every air-pilot so quickly develops. On the outbreak of war he had been out with General French, had been through the retreat from Mons, and while scouting in the air during the first battle of Ypres, had been attacked by a German Taube. A fierce and intensely exciting fight in the air ensued, as a result of which he brought his enemy down within our own lines, but unfortunately received a severe wound in the stomach himself, and, planing down, reached earth safely a long distance away and collapsed unconscious.

The condition of his health was such that the Medical Board refused to pass him for service abroad again, therefore he was now devoting his time to building aeroplanes for the Government, and frequently flying them at night, thus assisting in the aerial defence of our coast, and of London.

Ronnie Pryor was known as one of the most daring and intrepid air-pilots that we possessed. Before his crash he had brought down quite a number of his adversaries in the air, for the manner in which he could manipulate his machine, "zumming," diving, rising, and flying a zigzag course, avoiding the enemy's fire, was marvellous. Indeed, it was he who one afternoon dropped nine bombs upon the enemy's aerodrome at Oudenarde, being mentioned in despatches for that daring exploit.

His one regret was that the doctor considered him "crooked." Discarding his uniform he, in defiance of everybody, flew constantly in the big biplane which he himself had built, and which the boys at Hendon had nicknamed "The Hornet." The machine was a "strafer," of the most formidable type, with an engine of two

hundred and fifty horse-power, fitted with a Lewis gun and a rack for bombs, while no more daring airman ever sat at a joy-stick than its owner.

"They're running that new Anzani engine on the bench at Hendon," Bellingham remarked presently. "I'm going out to see it. Come with me."

Ronnie considered for a few seconds, and then accepted the suggestion, he driving his partner out to Hendon in his yellow car which had been standing in St. James's Square.

At the busy aerodrome, where all sorts of machines were being assembled and tested, they entered the spacious workshops of the Pryor Aeroplane Factory where, in one corner, amid whirring machinery, a large aeroplane-engine was running at top speed with a hum that was deafening in the confined space.

Half-an-hour later both men went forth again into the aerodrome where several "school 'buses" were being flown by pupils of the flying school. Suddenly Bellingham's quick airman's eye caught sight of a biplane at a great height coming from the north-west.

"Why, isn't that Beryl up in your 'bus?" he exclaimed, pointing out the machine. "I didn't know she was out to-day."

"Yes," was Ronnie's reply. "She flew over to Huntingdon this morning to see her sister."

"Was she up with you last night?"

"Yes. She generally goes up daily."

"She has wonderful nerve for a woman," declared George. "A pupil who has done great credit to her tutor—yourself, Ronnie. How many times has she flown the Channel?"

"Seven. Three times alone, and four with

me. The last time she crossed alone she went up from Bedford and landed close to Berck, beyond Paris-Plage. She passed over Folkestone, and then over to Cape Grisnez."

"Look at her now!" Bellingham exclaimed in admiration. "By Jove! She's doing a good stunt!"

As he spoke the aeroplane which Beryl Gaselee was flying, that great battleplane of Ronnie's invention—"The Hornet," as they had named it on account of a certain politician's reassurance—circled high in the air above the aerodrome, making a high-pitched hum quite different from that of the other machines in the air.

"She's taken the silencer off," Ronnie remarked. "She's in a hurry, no doubt."

"That silencer of yours is a marvellous invention," George declared. "Thank goodness Fritz hasn't got it!"

Ronnie smiled, and selecting a cigarette from his case, tapped it down and slowly lit it, his eyes upon the machine now hovering like a great hawk above them.

"I can run her so that at a thousand feet up nobody below can hear a sound," he remarked. "That's where we've got the pull for night bombing. A touch on the lever and the exhaust is silent, so that the enemy can't hear us come up."

"Yes. It's a deuced cute invention," declared his partner. "It saved me that night a month ago when I got over Alost and put a few incendiary pills into the German barracks. I got away in the darkness and, though half-a-dozen machines went up, they couldn't find me."

"The enemy would dearly like to get hold of the secret," laughed Ronnie. "But all of us keep it guarded too carefully."

"Yes," said his partner, as they watched with admiring eyes, how Beryl Gaselee, the intrepid woman aviator, was manipulating the big battleplane in her descent. "Your invention for the keeping of the secret, my dear fellow, is quite as clever as the invention itself."

The new silencer for aeroplane-engines Ronnie Pryor had offered to the authorities, and as it was still under consideration, he kept it strictly to himself. Only he, his mechanic, Beryl and his partner George Bellingham, knew its true mechanism, and so careful was he to conceal it from the enemy in our midst, that he had also invented a clever contrivance by which, with a turn of a winged nut, the valve came apart, so that the chief portion—which was a secret—could be placed in one's pocket, and carried away whenever the machines were left.

"I don't want any frills from you, old man," laughed the merry, easy-going young fellow in flannels. "I'm only trying to do my best for my country, just as you have done, and just as Beryl is doing."

"Beryl is a real brick."

"You say that because we are pals."

"No, Ronnie. I say it because it's the rock-bottom truth; because Miss Gaselee, thanks to your tuition, is one of the very few women who have come to the front as aviators in the war. She knows how to fly as well as any Squadron Commander. Look at her now! Just look at the spiral she's making. Neither of us could do it better. Her engine, too, is running like a clock."

And, as the two aviators watched, the great battleplane swept round and round the aerodrome, quickly dropping from twelve thousand feet—

the height at which they had first noticed its approach—towards the wide expanse of grass that was the landing-place.

At last "The Hornet," humming loudly like a huge bumblebee, touched earth and came to a standstill, while Ronnie ran forward to help his well-beloved out of the pilot's seat.

"Hullo, Ronnie!" cried the fresh-faced, athletic girl merrily. "I didn't expect to find you here! I thought you'd gone to Harbury, and I intended to fly over and find you there."

"I ran out here with George to see that new engine running on the bench," he explained. "Come and have some tea. You must want some."

The girl, in her workmanlike air-woman's windproof overalls, her "grummet"—which in aerodrome-parlance means headgear—her big goggles and thick gauntlet-gloves, rose from her seat, whilst her lover took her tenderly in his arms and lifted her out upon the ground.

Then, after a glance at the altimeter, he remarked:

"By Jove, Beryl! You've been flying pretty high—thirteen thousand four hundred feet."

"Yes," laughed the girl merrily. "The weather this afternoon is perfect for a stunt."

Then, after the young man had gone to the exhaust, unscrewed the silencer and placed the secret part in his pocket, the pair walked across to the tea-room and there sat *tête-à-tête* upon the verandah gossiping.

Beryl Gaselee was, perhaps, the best-known flying-woman in the United Kingdom. There were others, but none so expert nor so daring. She would fly when the pylon pilots—as the ornate gentlemen of the aerodromes are called—shook their heads and refused to go up.

Soft-featured, with pretty, fair and rather fluffy hair, and quite devoid of that curious hardness of feature which usually distinguishes the female athlete, her age was twenty-three, her figure slightly *petite* and quite slim. Indeed, many airmen who knew her were amazed that such a frail-looking little person could manage such a big, powerful machine as Ronnie Pryor's "Hornet"—the 'bus which was the last word in battleplanes both for rapid rising and for speed.

The way in which she manipulated the joystick often, indeed, astonished Ronnie himself. But her confidence in herself, and in the stability of the machine, was so complete that such a thing as possible disaster never occurred to her.

As she sat at the tea-table, her cheeks fresh and reddened by the cutting wind at such an altitude, a wisp of fair hair straying across her face, and her big, wide-open blue eyes aglow with the pleasure of living, she presented a charming figure of that feminine type that is so purely English. They were truly an interesting pair, a fact which had apparently become impressed upon a middle-aged air-mechanic in brown overalls who, in passing the verandah upon which they were seated, looked up and cast a furtive glance at them.

Both were far too absorbed in each other to notice the man's unusual interest, or the expression of suppressed excitement upon his grimy face, as he watched them with covert glance. Had they seen it, they might possibly have been curious as to the real reason. As it was, they remained in blissful ignorance, happy in each other's confidence and love.

'Just the weather for another Zepp |raid

to-night," Ronnie was remarking. "No moon to speak of, wind just right for them, and a high barometer."

"That's why you're going to Harbury this evening, in readiness to go up, I suppose?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You'll let me go with you, won't you?" she begged, as she poured him his second cup of tea with dainty hand.

"You were up last night, and you've been for a long joy-ride to-day. I think it would really be too great a strain, Beryl, for you to go out to-night," he protested.

"No, it won't. Do let me go, dear!" she urged.

"Very well," he replied, always unable to refuse her, as she knew full well. "In that case we'll fly over to Harbury now, and put the 'bus away till to-night. I've sent Collins out there in readiness."

Then, half-an-hour later, "The Hornet," with Ronnie at the joy-stick and Beryl in the observer's seat, rose again from the grass and, after a couple of turns around the pylons, ascended rapidly, heading north-east.

As it did so, the dark-eyed mechanic in the brown overalls stood watching it grow smaller until it passed out of sight.

For some minutes he remained silent and pensive, his heavy brows knit as he watched. Then, suddenly turning upon his heel, he muttered to himself and walked to one of the flying schools where he, Henry Knowles, was employed as a mechanic on the 'buses flown by the men training as air-pilots for the Front.

In a little over half-an-hour the big biplane

with its loud hum travelled nearly forty miles from Hendon, until at last Ronnie, descending in search of his landmark, discovered a small river winding through the panorama of patchwork fields, small dark patches of woods, and little clusters of houses which, in the sundown, denoted villages and hamlets. This stream he followed until Beryl suddenly touched his arm—speech being impossible amid the roar of the engine—and pointed below to where, a little to the left, there showed the thin, grey spire of an ivy-clad village church and a circular object close by—the village gasometer.

The gasometer was their landmark.

Ronnie nodded, and then he quickly banked and came down upon a low hill of pastures and woods about five miles east of the church spire.

The meadow wherein they glided to earth in the golden sunset was some distance from a small hamlet which lay down in the valley through which ran a stream glistening in the light, and turning an old-fashioned water-mill on its course. Then, as Ronnie unstrapped himself from his seat and hopped out, he exclaimed :

“ Now, dear ! You must rest for an hour or two, otherwise I shall not allow you to go up with me after Zepps to-night.”

His smart young mechanic, a fellow named Collins, from the aeroplane works came running up, while Ronnie assisted Beryl out of the machine.

In a corner of the field not far distant was a long barn of corrugated iron, which Ronnie had transformed into a hangar for “ The Hornet ”—and this they termed “ The Hornet’s Nest.” To this they at once wheeled the great machine, Beryl bearing her part in doing so and being assisted by two elderly farm-hands.

Then Collins, the mechanic, having received certain instructions, his master and Beryl crossed the meadow and, passing through a small copse, found themselves upon the lawn of a large, old-fashioned house called Harbury Court. The place, a long, rambling two-storied Georgian one, with a wide porch and square, inartistic windows, was partly covered by ivy, while its front was gay with geraniums and marguerites.

There came forward to meet the pair Beryl's married sister Iris, whose husband, Charles Remington, a Captain in the Munsters, had been many months at the Front, and was now, alas! a prisoner of war in Germany.

"I heard you arrive," she said cheerily, addressing the pair. And then she told them how she had waited tea for them. Neither being averse from another cup, the trio passed through the French window into the big, cool drawing-room with its bright chintzes, gay flowers, and interesting bric-a-brac.

While Beryl went half-an-hour later to her room to rest, and Ronnie joined Collins to test various portions of the 'bus and its apparatus before the night flight, a curious scene was taking place in the top room of a block of new red-brick flats somewhere in a northern suburb of London—the exact situation I am not permitted to divulge.

From the window a very extensive view could be obtained over London, both south and east, where glowed the red haze of sunset upon the giant metropolis, with its landmarks of tall factory chimneys, church steeples, and long lines of slate roofs.

The room was a photographic studio. Indeed, the neat brass-plate upon the outer door of the

flat bore the name "R. Goring, Photographer," and as such, its owner was known to other tenants of the various suites, persons of the upper middle-class, men mostly occupying good positions in the City.

True, a whole-plate camera stood upon a stand in a corner, and there were one or two grey screens for backgrounds placed against the wall, but nothing else in the apartment showed that it was used for the purpose of photography. On the contrary, it contained a somewhat unusual apparatus, which two men present were closely examining.

Upon a strong deal table, set directly beneath the great skylight—which had been made to slide back so as to leave that portion of the roof open—was a great circular searchlight, such as is used upon ships, the glass face of which was turned upward to the sky.

Set in a circle around its face were a number of bright reflectors and prisms placed at certain angles, with, above them, a large brass ring across which white silk gauze was stretched so that the intense rays of the searchlight should be broken up, and not show as a beam in the darkness, and thus disclose its existence.

At a glance the cleverness of the arrangement was apparent. It was one of the enemy's guiding lights for Zeppelins!

The owner of the flat, Mr. Goring, a burly, grey-haired man of fifty-five, was exhibiting with pride to his visitor a new set of glass prisms which he had that day set at the proper angle, while the man who was evincing such interest was the person who—only a few hours before—had worked in his mechanic's overalls, at the Hendon Aerodrome, the man, Henry Knowles,

who was to all intents and purposes an Englishman, having been in London since he was three years of age. Indeed, so well did he speak his Cockney dialect, that none ever dreamt that he was the son of one Heinrich Klitz, or that his Christian name was Hermann.

His host, like himself, was typically English, and had long ago paid his naturalisation fees and declared himself of the British bulldog breed. In public he was a fierce antagonist of Germany. In strongest terms he denounced the Kaiser and all his ways. He had even written to the newspapers deploring Great Britain's mistakes, and, by all about him, was believed to be a fine, honest, and loyal Englishman. Even his wife, who now lived near Bristol, believed him to be British. Yet the truth was that he had no right to the name of Richard Goring, his baptismal name being Otto Kohler, his brother Hans occupying, at that moment, the post of President of the German Imperial Railways, the handsome offices of which are numbered 44, Linkstrasse, in Berlin.

The pair were members of the long-prepared secret enemy organisation in our midst—men living in London as British subjects, and each having his important part allotted to him to play at stated times and in pre-arranged places.

Richard Goring's work for his country was to pose as a photographer—so that his undue use of electric-light current should not attract attention—and to keep that hidden searchlight burning night after night, in case a Zeppelin were fortunate enough to get as far as London.

As "Light-post No. 22" it was known to those cunning Teutons who so craftily established in England the most wonderful espionage system

ever placed upon the world. In England there were a number of signallers and "light-posts" for the guidance of enemy aircraft, but this—one of the greatest intensity—was as a lighthouse, and marked as of first importance upon the aerial chart carried by every Zeppelin Commander.

Mr. Goring had shown and explained to his friend the improved mechanism of the light, whereupon Knowles—who now wore a smart blue serge suit and carried gloves in his hand—laughed merrily, and replied in English, for they always talked that language :

"I saw Gortz at Number Three last night. He has news from Berlin that the big air raid is to be made on the fourteenth."

"The fourteenth!" echoed his friend. Then, after a second's reflection, he added : "That will be Friday week."

"Exactly. There will be one or two small attempts before—probably one to-night—a reconnaissance over the Eastern Counties. At least it was said so last night at Number Three," he added, referring to a secret meeting place of the Huns in London.

"Well," laughed the photographic artist. "I always keep the light going and, thanks to the plans they sent me from Wilhelmsplatz a month before the war, there is no beam of light to betray it."

"Rather thanks to the information we have when the British scouting airships leave their sheds."

"Ah, yes, my dear friend. Then I at once cut it off, of course," laughed the other. "But it is a weary job—up here alone each night killing time by reading their silly newspapers."

"One of our greatest dangers, in my opinion,

is that young fellow Ronald Pryor—the aeroplane-builder,” declared Knowles. “The man whom our friend Reichardt tried to put out of existence last week, and failed—eh?”

“The same. He has a new aeroplane called ‘The Hornet,’ which can be rendered quite silent. That is a very great danger to our airships.”

“We must, at all hazards, ascertain its secret,” said his host promptly. “What does Reichardt say?”

“They were discussing it last night at Number Three.”

And then the man who called himself Knowles and who, by working as a humble mechanic at a flying school at Hendon, was able to pick up so many facts concerning our air service, explained how “The Hornet” was kept in secret somewhere out in Essex—at some spot which they had not yet discovered.

“But surely you’ll get to know,” was the other’s remark, as he leant idly against the table whereon lay the complicated apparatus of prisms, and reflectors which constituted the lighthouse to guide the enemy aircraft.

“That is the service upon which Number Seven has placed me,” was the response.

He had referred to the director of that branch of the enemy’s operations in England—the person known as “Number Seven”—the cleverly concealed secret agent who assisted to guide the invisible hand of Germany in our midst. The individual in question lived in strictest retirement, unknown even to those puppets of Berlin who so blindly obeyed his orders, and who received such lavish payment for so doing. Some of the Kaiser’s secret agents said that he lived in London; others declared that he lived on a farm

in a remote village somewhere in Somerset ; while others said he had been seen walking in Piccadilly with a well-known peeress. Many, on the other hand, declared that he lived in a small country town in the guise of a retired shopkeeper, interested only in his roses and his cucumber-frames.

“ A pity our good friend Reichardt failed the other day,” remarked the man who posed as a photographer. “ What of that girl Gaselee ? ”

“ The next attempt will not fail, depend upon it,” was Knowles’ reply, in tones of confidence. “ When Ronald Pryor dies, so will she also. The decision at Number Three last night was unanimous.” And he grinned evilly.

Then both men went forth, Goring carefully locking the door of the secret studio. Then, passing through the well-furnished flat, he closed the door behind him, and they descended the stairs.

That night just after eleven o’clock, Beryl in her warm air-woman’s kit, with her leather “ grummet” with its ear-pieces buttoned beneath her chin, climbed into “ The Hornet ” and strapped herself into the observer’s seat.

Collins had been busy on the ’bus all the evening, testing the powerful dual engines, the searchlight, the control levers, and a dozen other details, including the all-important silencer. Afterwards he had placed in the long rack beneath the fusilage four high explosive spherical bombs, with three incendiary ones.

Therefore, when Ronnie hopped in, the machine was in complete readiness for a night flight.

Arranged at each corner of the big grass-field was a powerful electric light sunk into the ground and covered with glass. These could be switched

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on from the house supply and, by means of reflectors, gave splendid guidance for descent. At present, however, all was, of course, in darkness.

The night was windless and overcast, while the barometer showed the atmospheric pressure to be exactly that welcomed by Commanders of enemy airships.

Ronnie after switching on his little light over the instruments and examining his gauges, shouted to Collins :

“ Righto ! - Let her rip ! ”

In a moment there was a terrific roar. The wind whistled about their ears, and next second they were “ zumping,” up climbing at an angle of quite thirty degrees, instead of “ taxi-running ” the machine before leaving the ground.

Not a star showed, neither did a light. At that hour the good people of Essex were mostly in bed.

On their right, as they rose, Beryl noticed one or two red and green lights of railway signals, but these faded away as they still climbed ever up and up, travelling in the direction of the coast. The roar of the engines was deafening, until they approached a faintly seen cluster of lights which, by the map spread before him beneath the tiny light, Ronnie knew was the town of B——. Then he suddenly pulled a lever by which the noise instantly became so deadened that the whirr of the propeller alone was audible, the engines being entirely silenced.

The young man, speaking for the first time, exclaimed :

“ We'll first run along the coast and scout, and then turn back inland.”

Scarcely had he uttered those words when

suddenly they became blinded by a strong searchlight from below.

"Hullo! Our anti-aircraft boys!" he ejaculated and at the same moment he pushed back the lever, causing the engines to roar again.

The men working the searchlight at once distinguished the tri-coloured rings upon the planes, and by its sudden silence and as sudden roar they knew it to be "The Hornet." Therefore next second they shut off the beam of the light, and once again Ronnie silenced his 'bus.

It was then near midnight, and up there at ten thousand feet the wind was bitingly cold. Moreover there were one or two air currents which caused the machine to rock violently in a manner that would have alarmed any but those experienced in flying.

Beryl buttoned her collar still more snugly, but declared that she was not feeling cold. Below, little or nothing could be seen until, of a sudden, they ran into a thick cold mist, and then knew that they were over the sea.

With a glance at his luminous compass, the cheery young airman quickly turned the machine's nose due south, and a quarter of an hour later altered his course south-west, heading towards London.

"Nothing doing to-night, it seems!" he remarked to his companion, as, in the darkness, they sped along at about fifty miles an hour, the wind whistling weirdly through the stays, the propeller humming musically, but the sound seeming no more than that of a bumblebee on a summer's day.

It was certain that such sound could not be heard below.

After nearly an hour they realised by certain unmistakable signs—mostly atmospheric—that

they were over the outer northern suburbs of London.

Then, as Ronnie altered his course, in the inky blackness of the night, both saw, deep below, an intense white light burning like a beacon, but throwing no ray.

"That's curious!" remarked Pryor to the girl beside him. "I can't make it out. I've seen it several times before. One night a month ago I saw it put out, and then, when one of our patrolling airships had gone over, it came suddenly up again."

"An enemy light for the guiding of enemy Zeppelins—eh?" Beryl suggested.

"Exactly my opinion!" was her lover's reply.

As he spoke they passed out of range of vision, all becoming dark again. Therefore, Ronnie put down his lever and turned the 'bus quickly so that he could again examine the mysterious light which would reveal to the enemy the district of London over which they were then flying.

For a full quarter of an hour "The Hornet," having descended to about three thousand feet, manœuvred backwards and forwards, crossing and recrossing exactly over the intense white light below, Ronnie remaining silent, and flying the great biplane with most expert skill.

Suddenly, as he passed for the sixth time directly over the light, he touched a lever, and a quick swish of air followed.

In a moment the white light was blotted out by a fierce blood-red one.

No sound of any explosion was heard. But a second later bright flames leapt up high, and from where they sat aloft they could clearly distinguish that the upper story of the house was well alight.

Once again "The Hornet," which had hovered

over the spot, flying very slowly in a circle, swooped down in silence, for Pryor was eager to ascertain the result of his well-placed incendiary bomb.

As, in the darkness, they rapidly neared the earth, making no sound to attract those below, Beryl could see that in the streets, lit by the flames, people were running about like a swarm of ants. The alarm had already been given to the fire-brigade, for the faint sound of a fire-bell now reached their ears.

For five or six minutes Pryor remained in the vicinity watching the result of the bomb.

Beryl, strapped in, peered below, and then, placing her eye to the powerful night-glasses, she could discern distinctly two fire-engines tearing along to the scene of the conflagration.

Then with a laugh Ronnie pulled over the lever and, climbing high again, swiftly made off in the direction of Harbury.

"That spy won't ever show a light again!" he remarked grimly.

Next day the newspapers reported a serious and very mysterious outbreak of fire in a photographic studio at the top of a certain block of flats, the charred remains of the occupier, Mr. Richard Goring, a highly respected resident, being afterwards found, together with a mass of mysterious metal apparatus with which he had apparently been experimenting, and by which—as the Coroner's jury eventually decided four days later—the fatal fire must have been caused.

One morning Beryl and Ronnie, seated together in the drawing-room at Harbury, read the evidence given at the inquest and the verdict.

Both smiled, but neither made remark.

CHAPTER II.

MR. MARK MARX.

" I THINK we'll have to give her another dope, Collins," remarked Ronnie Pryor, as early one summer's morning he stood before "The Hornet," which, after a night-flight to the sea and back, was reposing in its " nest."

" It certainly wouldn't hurt her, sir, especially if we can get some of that new patent stuff that Mr. Henderson was telling us about the other day," the young mechanic replied.

" Ah ! That's a secret," laughed his master. " It's no doubt the finest dope ever invented, and happily Fritz, with all his scientific attainments, is still in the dark regarding it."

" I'm afraid the enemy will learn the secret before long, sir," the man remarked. " There are far too many strangers knocking about the aerodromes, and prying into everyone's business."

" I know, Collins, I know," remarked Ronnie. " They're very inquisitive regarding my new silencer."

" Yes, that's quite right, sir. I'm often being pumped about it by strangers."

" Well, I know you never utter a word concerning it."

" Trust me, sir," laughed the clean-shaven young man. " I always deny any knowledge of it. But the people who make the inquiries seem very shrewd indeed. And the funny thing is that they are never foreigners."

"Yes, I quite realise that. But at all hazards we must keep the secret of the silencer to ourselves," said Pryor. "The silencer enables us to make night-flights in secret without the enemy being any the wiser," he added.

Collins grinned. He knew, only too well, how "The Hornet" had, more than once, been over to Belgium and returned in safety without its presence being spotted by the enemy. He knew, too, that the bomb-rack had been full when Ronnie and Beryl Gaselee had ascended, and that it had been empty when they had returned.

On the previous night Pryor had been up, accompanied by his mechanic. They had come in at daybreak, snatched three hours' sleep, and were now out again overhauling the machine.

As they were speaking, Beryl Gaselee, dainty and fair-haired, in a cool, white cotton dress, suddenly came up behind them exclaiming :

"Good-morning, Ronnie! Iris is waiting breakfast patiently for you."

"Oh, I really forgot, dear!" replied the young airman. "Collins and I have been so busy for the last hour."

Together they crossed the lawn arm-in-arm to the pleasant, old-world house.

When ten minutes later the pair sat down to breakfast in the sunlit dining-room, the long windows of which led out upon an ancient terrace embowered with roses, Mrs. Remington came in, greeting Ronald with the protest—

"I wish, when you come in, you'd put your silencer on your boots, Ronnie! You woke me up just at four, and Toby started to bark."

"By Jove! Did I? Lots of apologies! I'll creep about in my socks in future," declared the culprit, stooping to pat the miniature "pom."

"Did Sheppard give you the telephone message?" Mrs. Remington asked.

"No. What message?"

"Why, one that came in the middle of the night?"

"At that moment Sheppard, the old-fashioned butler who had just entered the room, interrupted, saying in his quiet way:

"I haven't seen Mr. Pryor before, madam." Then turning to Ronnie, he said: "The telephone rang at about a quarter to one. I answered it. Somebody—a man's voice—was speaking from Liverpool. He wanted you, sir. But I said you were out. He told me to give you a message," and he handed Ronnie a slip of paper upon which were pencilled the words:

"Please tell Mr. Ronald Pryor that Mark Marx has returned. He will be in London at the old place at ten o'clock to-night."

As Ronald Pryor's eyes fell upon that message all the light died from his face.

Beryl noticed it, and asked her lover whether he had received bad news. He started. Then, recovering himself instantly, he held his breath for a second, and replied:

"Not at all, dear. It is only from a friend—a man whom I believed had been killed, but who is well and back again in England."

"There must be many such cases," the fair-haired girl remarked. "I heard of one the other

day when a man reported dead a year ago, and for whom his widow was mourning, suddenly walked into his own drawing-room."

"I hope his return was not unwelcome?" said Ronnie with a laugh. "It would have been a trifle awkward, for example, if the widow had re-married in the meantime."

"Yes, rather a queer situation—at least, for the second husband," declared Iris, who was some five years Beryl's senior, and the mother of two pretty children.

"Did the person who spoke to you give any name?" asked Pryor of the butler.

"No, sir. He would give no name. He simply said that you would quite understand, sir."

Ronald Pryor did understand. Mark Marx was back again in England! It seemed incredible. But whose was that voice which in the night had warned him from Liverpool?

He ate his breakfast wondering. Should he tell Beryl? Should he reveal the whole curious truth to her? No. If he did so, she might become nervous and apprehensive. Why shake the nerves of a woman who did such fine work in the air? It would be best for him to keep his own counsel. Therefore, before he rose from the table, he had resolved to retain the secret of Marx's return.

After breakfast Ronald, having taken from "The Hornet" the essential parts of his newly invented silencer, which, by the way, he daily expected would be adopted by the Government, carried them back to the house and there locked them in the big safe which he kept in his bedroom.

Then, later on, Beryl drove him to the station

where he took train to London, and travelled down to his aeroplane factory, where, in secret, several big battleplanes of "The Hornet" type were being constructed.

It was a large, imposing place with many sheds and workshops, occupying a considerable area. The whole place was surrounded by a high wall, and, beyond, a barbed-wire entanglement, for the secrets of the work in progress were well guarded by trusty, armed watchmen night and day.

Pryor was seated in his office chatting with Mr. Woodhouse, the wide-awake and active manager, about certain business matters, when he suddenly said :

"By the way, it will be best to double all precautions against any information leaking out from here, and on no account to admit any strangers upon any pretext whatever. Even if any fresh Government viewer comes along he is not to enter until you have verified his identity-pass."

"Very well," was Woodhouse's reply. "But why are we to be so very particular?"

"Well, I have my own reasons. Without doubt, our friend the enemy is extremely anxious to obtain the secrets of "The Hornet," and also the silencer. And in these days we must run no risks."

Then, after a stroll through the sheds where a hundred or so men were at work upon the various parts of the new battleplane destined to "strafe" the Huns, and clear the air of the Fokkers, the easy-going but intrepid airman made his way back to Pall Mall, where he ate an early dinner alone in the big upstairs dining-room at the Royal Automobile Club.

By half-past seven he had smoked the post-prandial cigarette, swallowed a tiny glass of

Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge, and was strolling back along Pall Mall towards Charing Cross.

At the corner of the Haymarket he hailed a passing taxi, and drove out to Hammersmith to a small, dingy house situated in a side-turning off the busy King Street. There he dismissed the conveyance, and entered the house with a latch-key.

"Cranch!" he shouted when in the small, close-smelling hall, having closed the door behind him. "Cranch! Are you at home?"

"Hullo! Is that you, Mr. Pryor?" came a cheery answer, when from the back room on the ground-floor emerged a burly, close-shaven man in his shirt-sleeves, for it was a hot, breathless night.

"Yes. I'm quite a stranger, am I not?" laughed Pryor, following his host back into the cheaply furnished sitting-room.

"Look here, Cranch, I'm going out on a funny expedition to-night," he said. "I want you to fit me up with the proper togs for the Walworth Road. You know the best rig-out. And I want you to come with me."

"Certainly, Mr. Pryor," was his host's reply. John Cranch had done his twenty-five years in the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard as sergeant and inspector, and now amplified his pension by doing private inquiry work. He was "on the list" at the Yard, and to persons who went to the police headquarters to seek unofficial assistance his name was frequently given as a very reliable officer.

The pair sat for some time in earnest consultation, after which both ascended to a bedroom above, where, in the cupboard, hung many suits of clothes, from the rags of a tramp—with broken

boots to match—to the smart evening clothes of the prosperous middle-aged *roué* who might be seen at supper at the Savoy, or haunting the night-clubs of London. Among them were the uniforms of a postman, a railway-porter, with caps belonging to the various companies, a fireman, a private soldier, a lieutenant, a gas-inspector, a tram-conductor, and other guises which ex-detective John Cranch had, from time to time, assumed.

Within half-an-hour the pair again descended, and entering the sitting-room they presented quite a different appearance.

Ronnie Pryor's most intimate friend would certainly not easily have recognised him. Even Beryl Gaselee would have passed him by in the street without a second glance, for his features were altered; he wore a small moustache, and his clothes were those of an East-end Jew. At the same time Cranch was dressed as a hard-working costermonger of the true Old Kent Road type.

Together they drove in a taxi across South London to the railway-arch at Walworth Road station, beneath which they alighted and, turning to the right along the Camberwell Road, crossed it and went leisurely into the Albany Road—that long, straight thoroughfare of dingy old-fashioned houses which were pleasant residences in the “forties,” when Camberwell was still a rural village—the road which ran direct from Camberwell Gate to the Old Kent Road.

Darkness had already fallen as the pair strolled leisurely along until they passed a small house on the left, close to the corner of Villa Street.

As they went by, their eyes took in every detail. Not a large house, but rather superior to its neighbours, it lay back behind a small garden and

seemed closely shuttered and obscure. Nearly opposite it Cranch's sharp eyes espied a "To Let" board upon a house, and he at once suggested that if they hid behind the railing they could watch the house of mystery in security.

This they did, and after a little manœuvring—for there were many people passing in the vicinity—they both crouched beneath a soot-laden lilac-bush, which commanded full view of all who went from and came to the dark house before them.

As Ronnie crouched there in concealment one thought alone kept running through his brain. Truth to tell, he was much mystified as to the identity of that mysterious person who, from Liverpool, had given him warning.

Was it a trap? He had certainly not overlooked such a contingency.

For over an hour and a half the two men remained there, eagerly watching the diminishing stream of foot-passengers until at last, coming up from the Camberwell Road, Ronnie noticed a man approaching.

For some seconds he kept his eye steadily upon him, for the moon was now shining fitfully through the clouds.

"By Jove! How curious!" he whispered to his companion. "Why, that's Knowles, one of the mechanics at Hendon! I wonder what he's doing over here?"

Ronnie was, of course, in ignorance—as was also everyone at the Hendon Aerodrome—that Henry Knowles, the hard-working, painstaking mechanic, whose expert work it was to test machines, was not really an Englishman as he pretended to be, even though he could imitate the Cockney tongue, but that his actual baptismal

name was Hermann Klitz, and his place of birth Coblenz, on the Rhine.

With wondering eyes the airman watched the mechanic pass into the dark, silent house.

“Very strange!” he remarked beneath his breath. “Very strange indeed!”

But his curiosity was increased by the arrival, ten minutes later, of a rather short, middle-aged man of distinctly burly build. The newcomer hesitated for a few minutes, gazing about him furtively, as though he feared being followed, and then slipped through the gate up to the house, where the door fell open, he being apparently expected.

“Did you see that man, Cranch?” asked Pryor in a whisper. “That’s Germany’s great spy—Mark Marx. He’s been in America for the past ten months or so, and is now back here upon some secret mission concerning our aircraft—upon which he’s an expert.”

“They’re holding a council here—by the look of it,” remarked the detective. “Five of them have gone in—and why, look! Here comes another—a lame man!”

“Yes,” said Ronnie. “This secret place of meeting is known to the spies of Germany as ‘Number Three.’ From here certain of the clever activities of the invisible hand of Germany are frequently directed, as from other centres; Mark Marx is a clever adventurer who used to be the assistant director of the enemy’s operations in this country. Apparently he has returned to London to resume his sinister activities against us. He acts directly under the control of the head of Germany’s secret service in this country, that shrewd, clever, and influential person who hides his identity beneath the official description of ‘Number Seven.’”

"Then 'Number Three' is the headquarters of 'Number Seven'—eh!" asked the ex-detective in a whisper.

"Exactly. That some devilish conspiracy is now afoot is quite certain. Our duty is to discover and to thwart it. I was secretly warned that Mark Marx had returned, and now, knowing that it is so, I must take adequate precautions."

"How shall you act?"

"I have not yet decided."

"But can't we endeavour to ascertain what is in progress here to-night, Mr. Pryor?" suggested Cranch.

Pryor and his companion kept vigilant watch till far into the night when, about two o'clock in the morning, a big closed motor-car suddenly came along the road, pulling up a little distance from the house. The driver, a tall, thin man, alighted and waited for some moments, when the two men, Marx and Klitz, *alias* Knowles, emerged carrying between them a small but heavy leather travelling trunk and, assisted by the driver, placed this on top of the car. Then the two men entered and drove rapidly away.

"That car may come again to-morrow night," remarked Pryor. "We must lay our plans to follow it."

Next night, Pryor having ascertained the identity of the friend who had warned him of Mark Marx's return to England, he and Cranch were again at the same spot beneath the stunted lilac-bush. Round the corner, in Villa Street, at a little distance away stood Ronnie's closed car with Beryl Gaselee in charge, the latter wearing the cap and dust-coat of a war-time *chauffeuse*.

Hour after hour they waited until dawn broke.

But as no one came to that house known as "Number Three," they were compelled at last to relinquish their vigilance.

For four nights in succession they kept the same watch, Cranch having revealed his identity and explained to the constable on duty that the car was awaiting an expected friend.

On the fifth occasion, just about half-past one in the morning, sure enough the big, dark-green car drove up, and from it Marx alighted and entered the enemy's headquarters.

Presently Klitz and another man arrived on foot, and they also entered. Subsequently another small but heavy trunk was taken out and placed in the car.

By this time Ronnie and his companion had reached their own car, and while Cranch and Beryl entered, Ronnie jumped up to the wheel and started off. He first took a street that he knew ran parallel with the Albany Road in the direction the car had taken before and, after going a little distance, he turned back into the thoroughfare just in time to see a rear-lamp pass rapidly. Quickly he increased his speed, and soon satisfied himself that it was the car he intended following.

They turned at last into the Old Kent Road, and then on as far as a dark little place which Ronnie knew as Kingsdown. Then, branching to the right, keeping the red rear-light ever in view, they went by the byways as far as Meopham and on past Jenkin's Court, through some woods until suddenly the car turned into a gateway and went across some open pastures.

Ronnie saw that he had not been noticed by the driver, who was too intent upon his speed and quite unsuspecting. Therefore he pulled up

dead, waited for ten minutes or so, and then flew past the gateway at top speed. For nearly a mile he went, and at last came to a standstill upon a long, steep slope with a copse on each side, quite dark on account of the overhanging trees.

Having run the car to the side of the road they alighted. Ronnie switched off the lamps, and they walked noiselessly back on the grass by the roadside and at length, having turned in at the gateway, saw, in the dim light, a long, low-built farmhouse with haystacks beside it and big barns.

The throb of the car's engine showed that the Germans were probably only depositing the trunk, and did not intend to remain.

The watchers, therefore, withdrew again into the shadow of a narrow little wood close to the house and there waited in patience. Their expectations were realised a quarter of an hour later when the two men emerged from the modern-built farmhouse and drove away, evidently on their return to London.

By their manoeuvre Pryor became greatly puzzled. He could not see why that trunk had been transferred to that lonely farm in the night hours.

After the car had disappeared they waited in motionless silence for some time until, after a whispered consultation, they ventured forth again.

Cranch's suggestion was to examine the place, but unfortunately a collie was roaming about, and as soon as they came forth from their place of concealment the dog gave his alarm note.

"Ben!" cried a gruff, male voice in rebuke, while at the same time a light showed in the upper window of the farm.

Meanwhile the trio of watchers remained hidden in the shadow of a wall close to the spacious farmyard until the dog had gone back.

Ronnie had resolved to leave the investigation until the following day, therefore all three crept back to the car and, after carefully noting the exact spot and the silhouette of the trees, they at last started off and presently finding a high road, ran down into Wrotham, and on into the long town of Tonbridge.

At the hotel their advent at such an early hour was looked upon askance, but a well-contrived story of a night journey and unfortunate tyre trouble allayed any suspicions, and by seven o'clock the three were seated at an ample breakfast with home-cured ham and farmyard eggs. Afterwards, for several hours, Beryl rested while the airman and the detective wandered about the little Kentish town discussing their plans.

When, at eleven o'clock, Ronnie met Beryl again downstairs, the trio went into one of the sitting-rooms where they held secret council.

"Now," exclaimed Ronnie, "my plan is this. I'll run back alone to the farm and stroll around the place to reconnoitre and ascertain who lives there. Without a doubt they are agents of Germany, whoever they are, because it is a depôt for those mysterious trunks from 'Number Three.'"

"I wonder what they contain, dear?" Beryl said, her face full of keenest interest.

"We shall ascertain, never fear. But we must remain patient, and work in strictest secrecy."

"Well, Mr. Pryor, you can play the police game as well as any of us," declared Cranch, with a light laugh.

Therefore, a quarter of an hour later, Pryor took the car and returning to a spot near the farm—which he afterwards found was called Chandler's Farm—and running the car into a meadow, left it while he went forward to reconnoitre.

As he approached, he noticed two men working in a field close by, therefore he had to exercise great care not to be detected. By a circuitous route he at last approached the place, finding it, in daylight, to be a very modern up-to-date establishment—evidently the dairy farm of some estate, for the outbuildings and barns were all new, and of red brick, with corrugated iron roofs.

The farmhouse itself was a big, pleasant place situated on a hill, surrounded by a large, well-kept flower-garden, and commanding a wide view across Kent towards the Thames Estuary and the coast.

And as Ronnie crept along the belt of trees, his shrewd gaze taking in everything, there passed from the house across the farmyard a tall man in mechanic's blue overalls. He walked a trifle lame, and by his gait Pryor felt certain that he was one of the men who had been present at that mysterious house called "Number Three" a few nights before.

But why should he wear mechanic's overalls, unless he attended to some agricultural machinery at work on the farm?

Only half-satisfied with the result of his observations, Ronnie returned at length to his companions, when it was resolved to set watch both at Albany Road and at Chandler's Farm. With that object Pryor later that day telegraphed to Collins calling him to London from Harbury, and after meeting him introduced him to the ex-detective.

Then that night the two men went to Albany Road, while Ronnie and Beryl returned in the car back into Kent, where soon after ten o'clock they were hiding on the edge of the little wood whence there was afforded a good view of the approach to the lonely farm.

Time passed very slowly ; they dared not speak above a whisper. The night was dull and overcast, with threatening rain, but all was silent save for the howling of a dog at intervals and the striking of a distant church clock.

Far across the valley in the darkness of the sky behind the hill could be seen the flicker of an anti-aircraft searchlight somewhere in the far distance, in readiness for any aerial raid on the part of the Huns.

"I can't think what can be in progress here, Beryl," Ronnie was whispering. "What, I wonder, do those trunks contain ?"

"That's what we must discover, dear," was the girl's soft reply as, in the darkness, his strong hand closed over hers and he drew her fondly to his breast.

A dim light still showed in one of the lower windows of the farmhouse, though it was now long past midnight.

Was the arrival of someone expected ? It certainly seemed so, because just at two o'clock the door opened and the form of the lame man became silhouetted against the light. For a moment he came forth and peered into the darkness. Then he re-entered and ten minutes later the light, extinguished below, reappeared at one of the bedroom windows, showing that the inmate had retired.

For six nights the same ceaseless vigil was kept, but without anything abnormal transpiring. The

man Marx had not again visited the mysterious house in Albany Road, yet the fact that the obscured light showed nightly in the window of Chandler's Farm, made it apparent that some midnight visitor was expected. For that reason alone Ronnie did not relinquish his vigilance.

One night he was creeping with Beryl towards the spot where they spent so many silent hours, and had taken a shorter cut across the corner of a big grass-field when, of a sudden, his well-beloved stumbled and almost fell. Afterwards, on groping about, he discovered an insulated electric wire lying along the ground.

"That's curious," he whispered. "Is this a telephone, I wonder?"

Fearing to switch on his torch, he felt by the touch that it was a twin wire twisted very much like a telephone-lead.

At the same moment, as they stood together in the corner of the field, Beryl sniffed, exclaiming:

"What a very strong smell of petrol!"

Her lover held his nose in the air, and declared that he, too, could detect it, the two discoveries puzzling them considerably. Indeed, in the succeeding hours as they watched together in silence, both tried to account for the existence of that secret twisted wire. Whence did it come, and whither did it lead?

"I'll investigate it as soon as it gets light," Ronnie declared.

Just before two o'clock the silence was broken by the distant hum of an aeroplane. Both detected it at the same instant.

"Hullo! One of our boys doing a night stunt?" remarked Ronnie, straining his eyes into the darkness, but failing to see the oncoming

machine. Away across the hills a long, white beam began to search the sky and, having found the machine and revealed the rings upon it, at once shut off again.

Meanwhile, as it approached, the door of Chandler's Farm was opened by the tall, lame man, who stood outside until the machine, by its noise, was almost over them. Then to the amazement of the watchers, four points of light suddenly appeared at the corners of the grass-field on their left.

"By Jove! Why, he's coming down!" cried Ronnie astounded. "There was petrol placed at each corner yonder, and it's simultaneously been ignited by means of the electric wire to show him his landing-place! It's an enemy machine got up to look like one of ours! This is a discovery!"

"So it is!" gasped Beryl, standing at her lover's side, listening to the aeroplane, unseen in the darkness, as it hovered around the farm and slowly descended.

The man at the farm had brought out a blue lamp and was showing it upward.

"Look!" exclaimed Pryor. "He's telling him the direction of the wind—a pretty cute arrangement, and no mistake!"

Lower and lower came the mysterious aeroplane until it skimmed the tops of the trees in the wood in which they stood, then, making a tour of the field, it at last came lightly to earth within the square marked by the little cups of burning petrol.

The pilot stopped his engine, the four lights burnt dim and went out one after the other, and the lame man, hurrying down, gave a low whistle which was immediately answered.

Then, on their way back to the farm, the pair

passed close to where the watchers were hidden, and in the silence the latter could distinctly hear them speaking—eagerly and excitedly in German!

Beryl and Ronnie watched there until dawn, when they saw the two men wheel the monoplane, disguised as British with rings upon it, into the long shed at the bottom of the meadow, the door of which the lame man afterwards securely locked.

An hour later Pryor was speaking on the telephone with Cranch in London, telling him what they had discovered. Soon after midday Beryl and Ronnie were back at Harbury, where in the library window they stood in consultation.

“Look here, Beryl,” the keen-faced young man said, “as that machine has crossed from Belgium, it is undoubtedly going back again. If so, it will take something with it—something which no doubt the enemy wants to send out of the country by secret means.”

“With that I quite agree, dear.”

“Good. Then there’s no time to be lost,” her lover said, poring over a map. “We’ll fly over to Chandler’s Farm this afternoon, come down near Fawkham, and put the ’bus away till to-night. Then we’ll see what happens.”

“He’ll probably fly back to-night,” the girl suggested.

“That’s exactly what I expect. I’ve told Collins and Cranch to meet us there.”

An hour later the great battleplane, “The Hornet,” Ronnie at the joy-stick, with Beryl in air-woman’s clothes and goggles strapped in the observer’s seat, rose with a roar from the big meadow at Harbury and, ascending to an altitude of about ten thousand feet, struck away due south across the patchwork of brown fields and

green meadows, with their tiny clusters of houses and white puffs of smoke all blowing in the same direction—the usual panorama of rural England, with its straight lines of rails and winding roads, as seen from the air.

The roar of the powerful twin engines was such that they found conversation impossible, but Beryl, practised pilot that she was, soon recognised the town over which they were flying.

Soon afterwards the Thames, half-hidden in mist and winding like a ribbon, came into view far below them. This served as guide, for Ronnie kept over the river for some time, at the end of which both recognised three church spires and knew that the most distant one was that of Fawkham, where presently they came down in a field about half-way between the station and the village, creating considerable sensation among the cottagers in the neighbourhood.

Collins, who was awaiting them near the station, soon arrived on foot to render them assistance, the 'bus being eventually put beneath a convenient shed used for the shacking of hay.

Ronnie had not used the silencer, fearing to create undue excitement among the anti-aircraft boys, many of whom had, of course, watched the machine's flight at various points, examining it through glasses and being reassured by its painted rings.

Until night fell the lovers remained at Fawkham, taking their evening meal in a small inn there, and wondering what Cranch had seen during the daylight vigil he had kept since noon. Collins had left them in order to go on ahead.

As dusk deepened into night both Pryor and his well-beloved grew more excited. The discovery they had made was certainly an amazing

one, but the intentions of the enemy were still enveloped in mystery.

That something desperate was to be attempted was, however, quite plain.

In eagerness they remained until night had fallen completely, then, leaving the inn, they returned to the farmer's shed, and, wheeling forth the powerful machine, got in and, having bidden the astonished farmer good-night, Ronnie put on the silencer, started the engines, and next moment, rising almost noiselessly, made a wide circle in the air. Taking his bearings with some difficulty, he headed for a small, open common, which they both knew well, situated about a quarter of a mile from Chandler's Farm.

There, with hardly any noise, they made a safe descent. Scarcely had the pilot switched off the engines, when the faithful Collins appeared with the news that Marx and the man Knowles had arrived from London in the car at seven o'clock.

Presently, when Collins had been left in charge of the 'bus, and Ronnie and Beryl had stolen up to where Cranch was waiting, the latter whispered that Marx and Knowles had both accompanied the German pilot down to the shed wherein the disguised machine was reposing. "They're all three down there now," added the ex-detective.

"Did they bring anything in the car?"

"Yes. Half-a-dozen cans of petrol. They've just taken them down to the shed."

And even as he replied they could hear the voices of the three returning. They were conversing merrily in German.

Another long, watchful hour went by, and the darkness increased.

"If he's going over to Belgium it will take

him about an hour and three-quarters to reach Zeebrugge—for that's where he probably came from," remarked the expert Pryor. "It's light now at four, so he'll go up before two, or not at all."

"He would hardly risk being caught at sea in daylight," declared Beryl.

Then, for a long time, there was silence, the eyes of all three being fixed upon the door of the farm until, of a sudden, it opened and the lame man and the enemy pilot were seen to emerge carrying between them one of the old leather trunks that had been brought from London.

"Hullo! They're going to take it across by air!" cried Pryor. "It must contain something which ought to remain in this country!"

They watched the trunk being carried in silence away into the darkness to the shed. Then presently the two men returned and brought out the second trunk, which they carried to the same spot as the first.

"H'm!" remarked Ronnie, beneath his breath. "A devilish clever game—no doubt!"

Then, instructing Cranch to remain and watch, he led Beryl back to where "The Hornet" stood.

Into the observer's seat he strapped the girl, and, hopping in himself, whispered to Collins to get all ready.

The engine was started; but it made no sound greater than a silent motor-car when standing.

Ronnie and Beryl strained their ears to listen for the sound of the engine of the enemy 'plane.

Those moments were full of breathless tension and excitement. "The Hornet" was waiting to rise.

Suddenly there was a loud sound of uneven motor explosions in the direction of the farm.

The engine was firing badly. In a few moments, however, it was rectified, and the loud and increasing hum told Ronnie that the enemy had risen.

"Stand clear," he shouted to Collins, and then, as he pulled over the lever, "The Hornet" dashed forward and was soon rising rapidly, but in silence.

So dark was it that he could not distinguish the enemy. Yet, heading for the coast, as he knew that was the direction the German had taken, he rose higher and higher until five minutes later Beryl, at his orders, suddenly switched on the searchlight and swept around below them.

At first they could distinguish nothing, yet from the direction of the humming they knew it must be below them.

Two minutes later Ronnie's quick eyes saw it in front of them, but a hundred feet or so nearer the ground.

The enemy pilot, alarmed by the unexpected searchlight in the air, suddenly rose, but Ronnie was too quick for him and rose also, at the same time rapidly overhauling him.

Beryl, holding her breath, kept the searchlight with difficulty upon him as gradually "The Hornet" drew over directly above him.

Quick as lightning Ronnie touched a button.

There was a loud swish of air, followed a second later by a dull, heavy explosion in the valley far below.

The bomb had missed !

The enemy was still rising, and from him came the quick rattle of a machine-gun, followed by a shower of bullets from below.

Ronnie Pryor set his teeth hard, and as he again touched the button, exclaimed :

"Take that, then !"

Next second a bright flash lit up the rural

landscape, followed by a terrific explosion, the concussion of which caused "The Hornet" to stagger, reel, and side-slip, while the enemy aeroplane was seen falling to earth a huge mass of blood-red flame.

On the following day the evening papers reported the finding of a mysterious wrecked and burnt-out aeroplane "somewhere in Kent."

The pilot had been burnt out of all recognition, but among the wreckage there had been discovered, it was said, some metal fittings believed to be the principal parts of some unknown machine-gun.

Only Ronald Pryor and Beryl Gaselee knew the actual truth, namely, that the enemy's secret agents, at Marx's incentive, had stolen the essential parts of a newly-invented machine-gun, and that these were being conveyed by air to within the German lines, when the clever plot was fortunately frustrated by "The Hornet."

CHAPTER III.

THE SHABBY STRANGER.

"RONALD has wired that he can't get back here till to-night, so I shall fly 'The Hornet' over to Sleaford to see Rose," remarked Beryl to her sister Iris, as they sat together at breakfast at Harbury one warm August morning.

"Perhaps Ronald might object," remarked Mrs. Remington, who was always averse from her sister making ascents alone upon "The Hornet."

"Oh, Ronnie won't object! Besides, he always

says that I can fly just as well as any man."

"But do be careful, won't you, Beryl?" urged her sister. "Is the weather really in a condition for making such a flight?"

"Perfect. I've just been looking at the barometer. It is quite steady, and I shall have an excellent wind back."

"I thought Ronald intended to go up on patrol-duty to-night. Last night was very dark—just the conditions for another Zepp raid."

"I expect he will," replied Beryl. "He told me that he intended to patrol the coast."

"Then, if you go, you really will be careful?" won't you?"

Beryl laughed.

"Why, when once up there is not so much danger in the air as there is in walking along a London street," she declared.

"So Ronnie always says, but I rather doubt the statement," Iris replied. "Personally, I prefer *terra firma*."

Breakfast ended, Beryl brushed her little black pom, one of her daily duties, and then, going to her room, changed her dress, putting on a warm jersey and a pair of workmanlike trousers, and over them a wind-proof flying suit with leather cap tied beneath her chin, a garb which gave her a very masculine appearance.

Very soon she arrived at "The Hornet Nest," and, at her directions, Collins brought out the great biplane and began to run the engine, which Beryl watched with critical eye. Then, climbing into the pilot's seat, she began to manipulate the levers to reassure herself that all the controls were in order.

“ Beautiful morning for a flip, miss ! ” remarked the mechanic in brown overalls. “ Are you going up alone ? ”

“ Yes, Collins. I’m going to visit my youngest sister at Sleaford, in Lincolnshire.”

“ Then I’ll take the bombs out,” he said, and at once removed the six powerful bombs from the rack, the projectiles intended for the destruction of Zeppelins. He also dismounted the quick-firing gun.

For some time Beryl did not appear entirely satisfied with the throb of the engines, but at last Collins adjusted them until they were running perfectly.

Within himself Collins was averse from allowing the girl to fly such a powerful machine, knowing how easily, with such a big engine-power, the biplane might get the upper hand of her. But as she had made ascents alone in it several times before, it was not for him to raise any objection.

Having consulted her map she arranged it inside its waterproof cover, looked around at the instruments set before her, and then strapped herself into the seat.

Meanwhile the engines had been humming loudly.

Suddenly she motioned to Collins to stand aside, and then, pulling over one of the levers, she ran along the grass for a short distance and rose gracefully in a long spiral, round and round over the Harbury woods, until the altimeter showed a height of five thousand feet.

Then she studied her map, took her bearings, and, drawing on her ample gauntlet gloves, for it became chilly, she followed a straight line of railway leading due north through Suffolk and Norfolk.

The sky was cloudless, with a slight head-wind. On her right, away in the misty distance, lay the North Sea, whence came a fresh breeze, invigorating after the stifling August morning on land. Deep below she identified villages and towns. Some of the latter were only indicated by palls of smoke, the wind on land being insufficient to disperse them. And over all the grey-green landscape was a strange flatness, for, viewed from above, the country has no contours. It is just a series of grey, green, and brown patch-work with white, snaky lines, denoting roads, and long, grey lines, sometimes disappearing and then reappearing, marking railways and their tunnels; while here and there comes a glint of sunshine upon a river or canal. In the ears there is only the deafening roar of petrol-driven machinery.

Once or twice, through the grey haze which always rises from the earth on a hot morning, Beryl saw the blue line of the sea—that sea so zealously guarded by Britain's Navy. Then she flew steadily north to the flat fens.

From below, her coming was signalled at several points, and at more than one air-station glasses were levelled at her. But the tri-coloured rings upon the wings reassured our anti-aircraft boys and, though they recognised the machine as one of unusual model, they allowed her to pass, for it was well-known that there were many experimental machines in the air.

Beryl had sought and found upon her map the Great Northern main line, and had followed it from Huntingdon to Peterborough. Afterwards, still following the railway, she went for many miles until, of a sudden, close by a small town which the map told her was called Bourne, in Lincolnshire, her engines showed signs of slackening.

Something was amiss. Her quick ear told her so. A number of misfires occurred. She pulled over another lever, but the result she expected was not apparent. It was annoying that being so near Sleaford she had met with engine trouble—for trouble there undoubtedly was.

At that moment she was flying at fully ten thousand feet, the normal height for a "non-stop run." Without being at all flurried she decided that it would be judicious to plane down to earth; therefore, putting "The Hornet's" nose to the wind, she turned slightly eastward, and, as she came down, decided to land upon a wide expanse of brown-green ground—which very soon she distinguished as a piece of flat, rich fenland, in which potatoes were growing.

At last she touched the earth and made a dexterous landing.

At that moment, to her great surprise, she became aware of a second machine in the vicinity. She heard a low droning like that of a big bumble-bee, and on looking up saw an Army monoplane coming down swiftly in her direction.

Indeed, its pilot brought it to earth within a few hundred yards of where she had landed. Then, springing out, he came across to where she stood.

On approaching her he appeared to be greatly surprised that the big biplane had been flown by a woman.

"I saw you were in trouble," explained the pilot, a tall, good-looking lieutenant of the Royal Flying Corps, who spoke with a slight American accent, "so I came down to see if I could give you any assistance."

"It is most awfully kind of you," Beryl replied, pulling off her thick gloves. "I don't think

it is really very much. I've had the same trouble before. She's a new 'bus."

"So I see," replied the stranger, examining "The Hornet" with critical eye. "And she's very fast, too."

"When did you first see me?" she asked with curiosity.

"You were passing over Huntingdon. I had come across to the railway from the Great North Road which I had followed up from London. I'm on my way to Hull."

"Well, I had no idea you were behind me!" laughed the girl merrily. The air-pilot with the silver wings upon his breast seemed a particularly nice man, and it showed a good *esprit de corps* to have descended in order to offer assistance to another man, as he had no doubt believed the pilot to be.

Without further parley, he set to work to help her in readjusting her engine, and in doing so quickly betrayed his expert knowledge of aeroplane-engines.

"I have only a few miles to go—to Sleaford. My sister lives just outside the town, and there is a splendid landing-place in her husband's grounds," Beryl explained, when at last the engine ran smoothly again.

It was but natural that the good-looking lieutenant should appear inquisitive regarding the new machine. His expert eye showed him the unusual power of the twin engines, and he expressed much surprise at several new inventions that had been introduced.

He told her that he had been flying for seven months at the Front, and had been sent home for a rest. He had flown from Farnborough that morning and was making a "non-stop" to the Humber.

Many were the questions he put to Beryl regarding "The Hornet." So many and so pressing were his queries that presently she became seized by distrust—why, she could not exactly decide.

The air-pilot naturally inquired as to the biplane's constructor, but all Beryl would say was :

"It is not mine. It belongs to a friend of mine."

"A gentleman friend, of course ?" he remarked, with a mischievous laugh.

"Of course ! He himself invented it."

"A splendid defence against Zeppelins," he said. "I see she can carry ten bombs, a search-light, and a Lewis gun. All are wanted against the Kaiser's infernal baby-killers," he added, laughing.

Then, having thoroughly examined "The Hornet," the courteous lieutenant of the Royal Flying Corps stood by until she had again risen in the air, waved her gloved hand in farewell, made a circle over the field, and then headed away for Sleaford.

"H'm !" grunted the flying-man as he stood watching her disappear. "Foiled again ! She's left that new silencer of hers at home ! That girl is no fool—neither is Ronald Pryor. Though I waited for her in Bury St. Edmunds and followed her up here, I am just about as wise regarding 'The Hornet' as I was before I started."

For a few moments he stood watching the machine as it soared higher and higher against the cloudless summer sky.

"Yes ! A very pretty girl—but very clever—devilishly clever !" he muttered to himself. "Just my luck ! If only she had had that

silencer I would have silenced her, and taken it away with me. However, we are not yet defeated.

About a week later Ronald Pryor and Beryl were lunching together in the grill-room of a West End hotel, which was one of their favourite meeting-places, when suddenly the girl bent over to her lover and exclaimed :

“ I’m sure that’s the man, Ronnie.”

“ What man ? ”

“ The nice Flying Corps officer whom I met near Bourn the other day. You’ll see him, sitting in the corner yonder alone—reading the paper,” she replied. “ Don’t look for a moment.”

“ Don’t you think you’ve made a mistake, dear ? ”

“ No, I feel positive I haven’t,” was the girl’s reply.

That morning Ronald Pryor, accompanied by Beryl, had made a flight in “ The Hornet ” from Harbury to the Essex coast and back, and they had just arrived in town by train. The renowned Zepp-hunter was in a light grey suit, while Beryl, becomingly dressed, was in a coat and skirt of navy blue gaberdine trimmed with broad black silk braid.

A few moments after Beryl had spoken, her lover turned suddenly, as though to survey the room in search of someone he knew ; his gaze met that of the solitary man eating his lunch leisurely in the corner and apparently, until that moment, absorbed in a newspaper. The stranger was good-looking, aged about thirty, thin, rather narrow-faced, with a pair of sharp steel-grey eyes, and a small dark moustache. His shoulders were square, and his appearance somewhat dandified. In his black

cravat he wore an unusually fine diamond, and his hands were white and well-kept.

Apparently he was a man of leisure, and was entirely uninterested in those about him, for, after a sharp glance of inquiry at Ronald, he continued reading his paper.

"Are you quite sure you've made no mistake?" inquired Pryor of his companion.

"Positive, my dear Ronald. That's the man whom I met in the uniform of the Royal Flying Corps, and who was so kind to me. No doubt, he doesn't recognise me in these clothes."

"Then why isn't he in uniform now?"

"Perhaps he has leave to wear *civvies*," she replied. "There are so many curious regulations and exemptions nowadays."

Though the stranger's eyes had met those of Beryl there had been no sign of recognition. Hence she soon began to share Ronald's doubt as to whether he was really the same person who had descended in that potato field in Lincolnshire, and had so gallantly assisted her in her trouble.

Ronald and his well-beloved, having finished their luncheon, rose and drove together in a taxi over to Waterloo, the former being due to visit his works at Weybridge, where he had an appointment with one of the Government Inspectors.

As soon as they had passed out of the restaurant the man who sat alone tossed his paper aside, paid his bill, and left.

Ten minutes later he entered a suite of chambers in Ryder Street, where an elderly, rather staid-looking grey-haired man rose to greet him.

"Well?" he asked. "What news?"

"Nothing much—except that Pryor is flying

to-night on patrol work," replied the other in German.

"H'm, that means that he will have the new silencer upon his machine!"

"Exactly," said the man who had displayed the silver wings of the Royal Flying Corps, though he had no right whatever to them. "By day 'The Hornet' never carries the silencer. I proved that when I assisted the girl in Lincolnshire. We can only secure it by night."

"And that is a little difficult—eh?"

"Yes—a trifle."

"Then how do you intend to act, my dear Leffner?"

The man addressed shrugged his shoulders.

"I have an idea," was his reply. "But I do not yet know if it is feasible until I make further observations and inquiries."

"You anticipate success? Good!" the elder man replied in satisfaction. "Think of all it means to us. Only to-day I have received another very urgent request from our good friend, Mr. J——; a request for the full details of the construction of 'The Hornet.'"

"We have most of them," replied the man addressed as Leffner.

"But not the secret of the silencer. That seems to be well guarded, does it not?"

"It is very well guarded," Leffner admitted. "But I view the future with considerable confidence because the girl flies the machine alone, and—well," he laughed—"strange and unaccountable accidents happen to aeroplanes sometimes!"

A few days later, soon after noon, a narrow-faced man, with shifty eyes, carrying a small, well-worn leather bag, entered the old King's

Head Inn in Harbury village and, seating himself in the bar, mopped his brow with his handkerchief. The mile walk from the nearest station had been a hot one along a dusty, shadeless road, and when Jane Joyce, the landlady's daughter, appeared, the shabby traveller ordered a pint of ale, which he drank almost at one draught.

Then, lighting his pipe, he began to chat with Jane, having, as a preliminary, ordered some luncheon. By this manœuvre he had loosened the young woman's tongue, and she was soon gossiping about the village and those who lived there.

The wayfarer asked many questions ; as excuse, he said :

"The reason I want to know is because I travel in jewellery, and I daresay there are a lot of people about here whom I might call upon. I come from Birmingham, and I'm usually in this district four times a year, though I've never been in Harbury before. My name is George Bean."

"Well, there's not many people here who buy jewellery," replied the landlady's daughter. "Farming is so bad just now, and the war has affected things a lot here. But why don't you go up and see Mrs. Remington, at Harbury Court ? They've got lots of money."

"Ah ! Who are they ?"

"Well, Captain Remington is a prisoner in Germany, but Mrs. Remington is still at home. She has her sister, Miss Beryl Gaselee, staying with her. Perhaps you've heard of her. She's a great flying-woman."

"Oh, yes !" replied the stranger. "I've seen things about her in the papers. Does she fly much ?"

"A good deal. Mr. Ronald Pryor, to whom she's engaged, invented her machine; he calls it 'The Hornet,' and he keeps it here—in a corrugated iron shed in the park, close to the house!"

"How interesting!"

"Yes. And the pair often go up at nights," went on the young woman. "Mother and I frequently hear them passing over the house in the darkness."

"Do you always hear them go up?" asked the stranger suddenly.

"No, not always. They go over sometimes without making a sound."

"That is at night, I suppose? In the day you can always hear them."

"Yes. Always."

The traveller in Birmingham jewellery remained silent for a few minutes.

"I suppose they have a mechanic there?"

"Yes—a Mr. Collins. He comes in sometimes with Mr. Sheppard, the butler. He was butler to the Colonel's old father, you know."

"And this Mr. Collins lives at the house, I suppose?"

"No. He sleeps in the place where the new aeroplane is kept."

Mr. Bean smiled, but made no comment. Knowledge of that fact was, to him, important. He lit another pipe, and, while Miss Joyce went away to lay the table for his lunch in the adjoining room, he stretched his legs and thought deeply.

Hans Leffner, *alias* George Bean, was the son of a German who, forty years before, had emigrated from Hamburg to Boston. Born in America he was, nevertheless, a true son of the Fatherland. He had been educated in Germany,

and returned to Boston about a year before war broke out.

Suddenly he had been called up for confidential service, and within a month had found himself despatched to London, the bearer of an American passport in the name of Henry Lane, commercial traveller, of St. Louis. Upon a dozen different secret matters he had been employed, until knowledge of the existence of "The Hornet" having reached the spy-bureau in Berlin, he received certain secret instructions which he was carrying out to the letter.

Hans Leffner had been taught at his mother's knee to hate England, and he hated it with a most deadly hatred. He was a clever and daring spy, as his masquerade in the Royal Flying Corps uniform clearly proved; moreover, he was an aviation expert who had once held a post of under-director in "Uncle" Zeppelin's aircraft factory.

For some weeks he had dogged the footsteps of Ronald and Beryl, and they, happy in each other's affection, had been quite ignorant of how the wandering American had been unduly attracted towards them.

The landlady of the King's Head—that long, thatched, old-world house over which for fifty years her husband had ruled as landlord—had no suspicion that the jeweller's traveller was anything but an Englishman from Birmingham. He spoke English well, and had no appearance of the Teuton.

Mr. Bean ate his chop alone, waited on by Jane, who, finding him affable, imparted to him all the information she knew regarding Harbury Court and its inmates.

At half-past two the traveller, taking his bag, set out on a tour of the village in an endeavour

to dispose of some of his samples. His appearance was much changed, and he bore but little resemblance to the pilot of the Royal Flying Corps who had descended near Bourne. He looked much older, and walked wearily, with a decided stoop.

At house after house in the long village street he called, disguising his intentions most perfectly. At more than one cottage he was allowed to exhibit his wares, and at the shop of the village baker the daughter in charge purchased a little brooch for five shillings. Its cost price was thirty shillings, but Mr. Bean wanted to effect a sale and, by so doing, appear to be carrying on a legitimate business.

By six o'clock he was back again at the King's Head, having called upon most of the inhabitants of Harbury. He had, indeed, been up to the Court, and not only had he shown his samples to the maids, but he had taken two orders for rings to be sent on approval.

Incidentally he had passed "The Hornet's" nest, and had seen the machine in the meadow outside, ready for the night flight. As a simple, hard-working, travel-stained dealer in cheap jewellery nobody had suspected him of enemy intentions. But he had laid his plans very carefully, and his observations round "The Hornet's" nest had told him much.

To Mrs. Joyce he declared that he was very tired and, in consequence, had decided to remain the night. So he was shown up stairs that were narrow to a low-ceilinged room where the bedstead was one that had been there since the days of Queen Anne. The chintzes were bright and clean, but the candle in its brass candlestick was a survival of an age long forgotten.

At ten o'clock he retired to bed, declaring himself very fatigued, but on going to his room he threw open the old-fashioned, latticed window, and listened. The night was very dark, but quite calm—just the night for an air raid from the enemy shore.

Having blown out his candle he sat down, alert at any sound. After nearly an hour, Mrs. Joyce and her daughter having retired to bed, he suddenly detected a slight swish in the air, quite distinct from the well-known hum of the usual aeroplane. It was a low sound, rising at one moment and lost the next. "The Hornet" had passed over the inn so quietly that it would not awaken the lightest sleeper.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed aloud to himself. "That silencer is, indeed wonderful!"

With the greatest caution he opened his door and, creeping down on tiptoe, was soon outside in the village street; keeping beneath the deep shadows, he went forward on the road which led up the hill to the long belt of trees near which had been erected the corrugated iron shed.

Meanwhile Ronald, accompanied by Beryl, had ascended higher and higher in the darkness. Ronnie had swung the machine into the wind, and they were climbing, climbing straight into the dark vault above. Below were twinkling shaded lights, some the red and green signal lights of railways. Beryl could see dimly the horizon of the world, and used as she was to it, she realised how amazing it was to look down upon Mother Earth. By day, when one is flying, the sky does not rise and meet in a great arch overhead, but, like a huge bowl, the sky seems to pass over and incircle the earth.

They were flying due east by the dimly lit compass at five thousand feet, heading straight for the Essex coast.

"We may possibly have visitors from Belgium to-night," laughed Ronnie, as he turned to his well-beloved. "But look! Why—we are already over the sea!"

Beryl, gazing down, saw below a tiny light twinkling out a message in Morse, answered by another light not far distant. Two ships were signalling. Then Ronnie made a wide circle in that limitless void which obliterated the meeting point of earth and sea.

The long white beam of a searchlight sweeping slowly seaward, turned back inland and followed them until it picked up "The Hornet," Ronnie banking suddenly to show the tri-coloured circles upon his wings.

Afterwards he again consulted his compass and struck due south, following the coast-line over Harwich and round to the Thames estuary.

"No luck to-night, dearest!" laughed Ronnie. "The barometer is too low for our friends."

"Yes," said the girl. "Let us get back!" And Ronnie once more circled his machine very prettily, showing perfect mastery over it, as he came down lower and lower until, when passing over Felixstowe, he was not more than three hundred feet in the air.

Meanwhile, the guest at the King's Head had made the most of his time. He had reasoned, and not without truth, that if "The Hornet" had ascended, the mechanic, Collins, would no doubt leave the hangar, and, if so, that now would be a good opportunity to obtain entrance.

With that in view he had crept along to the shed and, as he had hoped, found the doors unlocked.

Quickly he entered and, by the aid of his flash-lamp, looked round.

At last the long tentacles of the German spy-bureau in the "Königgrätzerstrasse" had spread to the little village of Harbury.

Five minutes sufficed for the spy to complete his observations. At an engineer's bench he halted and realised the technical details of a certain part of the secret silencer. But only a part, and by it he was pretty puzzled.

He held it in his hand in the light of his flash-lamp and, in German exclaimed :

"*Ach!* I wonder how that can be? If we could only obtain the secret of that silencer!" the Hun continued to himself. "But we shall—no doubt! I and my friends have not come here for nothing. We have work before us—and we shall complete it, if not to-day—then in the near to-morrow."

The shabby stranger returned to the King's Head and, letting himself in, retired to his room without a sound. Hardly had he undressed when he heard again that low swish of "The Hornet" on her return from her scouting circuit of the Thames estuary.

Hans Leffner, *alias* Bean, had not been trained as a spy for nothing. He was a crafty, clever cosmopolitan, whose little eyes and wide ears were ever upon the alert for information, and who could pose perfectly in half-a-dozen disguises. As the traveller of a Birmingham jewellery firm he could entirely deceive the cheap jeweller of any little town. He was one of many such men who were passing up and down Great Britain, learning all they could of our defences, our newest inventions, and our intentions.

Next day Mr. Bean remained indoors at the

King's Head, for it was a drenching day. But at last, when the weather cleared at eight o'clock, he lit his pipe and strolled out in the fading light.

Before leaving he had taken from the bottom of the bag containing his samples of cheap jewellery a small, thick screw-bolt about two inches long, and placed it in his pocket with an air of confidence.

Half-an-hour later he crept into the shed which sheltered "The Hornet" and, not finding the silencer upon the exhaust, as he had anticipated, turned his attention to the fusilage of the biplane. From this he quickly, and with expert hand, unscrewed a bolt, swiftly substituting in its stead the bolt he had brought, which he screwed in place carefully with his pocket wrench.

The bolt he had withdrawn hung heavily in his jacket-pocket, and as he stood, alert and eager, there suddenly sounded the musical voice of a woman.

Next second he had slipped out of the hangar and gained cover in a thicket close by.

Beryl was crossing the grass, laughing gaily in the falling light. With her were Pryor, and Collins the mechanic. A few minutes before, Ronald and she, having finished dinner, had put on their flying-suits and, passing through the long windows out upon the lawn, had bidden farewell to Iris, as they were going on their usual patrol flight.

Ronald, leaving her suddenly, struck away to the hangar and, entering it, turned up the electric lights. With both hands he tested the steel stays of the great biplane, and then, aided by the mechanic, he wheeled the machine out ready for an ascent, for the atmospheric conditions were exactly suitable for an air raid by the enemy.

"We had better go up and test the engines, dear," he suggested. "This afternoon they were not at all satisfactory."

Beryl climbed into the observer's seat, he following as pilot, while Collins disappeared round the corner of the hangar to get something.

Then the pair, seated beside each other and tightly strapped in, prepared to ascend in the increasing darkness.

The sudden roar of the powerful engines was terrific, and could be heard many miles away, for they were testing without the silencer.

Scarcely had they risen a hundred feet from the ground when there was a sharp crack and "The Hornet," swerving, shed her right wing entirely, and dived straight with her nose to the earth.

A crash, a heavy thud, and in an instant Ronald and Beryl, happily strapped in their seats, were half-stunned by the concussion. Had they not been secured in their seats both must have been killed, as the man Leffner had intended.

The engine had stopped, for, half the propeller being broken, the other half had embedded itself deeply into the ground. Collins came running up, half frantic with fear, but was soon reassured by the pair of intrepid aviators, who unstrapped themselves and quickly climbed out of the wreckage. Ere long a flare was lit and the broken wing carefully examined; it was soon discovered that "The Hornet" had been tampered with, one of the steel bolts having been replaced by a painted one of wood!

"This is the work of the enemy!" remarked Ronnie thoughtfully. "They cannot obtain sight of the silencer, therefore there has been a dastardly plot to kill both of us. We must be a little more wary in future, dear."

Ronald's shrewdness did not show itself openly, but having made a good many inquiries, both in Harbury village and elsewhere, he, at last, was able to identify the man who had made that secret attempt upon their lives. Of this, however, he said nothing to Beryl. "The Hornet" was repaired, and they made night flights again.

Ronald anticipated that a second attempt would be made to obtain the silencer. Taking Collins into his confidence, he made it his habit each dawn, when they came home from their patrol of the coast, to leave in the little office beside the hangar the box which contained the silencer, the secret of which he knew the Germans were so very anxious to obtain.

For a fortnight nothing untoward occurred, until one morning soon after all three had returned from a flight to London and back, they were startled by a terrific explosion from the direction of the hangar.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Ronald. "What's that?"

The trap has gone off, sir," was Collins's grim reply.

All three ran back to the shed, whereupon they saw that the little office had been entirely swept away, and that part of the roof of the hangar was off. Amid the wreckage lay the body of a man with his face shattered, stone-dead. "He thought the box contained the silencer, and when he lifted the lid he received a nasty shock, sir—eh?" Collins remarked.

"But who is it, Ronald?" gasped Beryl, horrified.

"The man who made the attempt on our lives a month ago, dearest," was her lover's reply. "Come away. He has paid the penalty which all spies should pay."

A few hours later Ronald Pryor made a statement to the authorities which resulted in the explosion being regarded, to all but those immediately concerned, as a complete mystery.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THURSDAY RENDEZVOUS.

BERYL GASELEE, in her warm leather motor-coat and close-fitting little hat, stood gazing out of the coffee-room window of the Unicorn Hotel in the quiet old cathedral town of Ripon, in Yorkshire.

In the falling twilight of the wintry afternoon all looked dull and cheerless. The car stood outside with Ronald Pryor and Collins attending to some slight engine-trouble—the fast, open car which Ronnie sometimes used to such advantage. It was covered with mud, after the long run north from Suffolk, for they had started from Harbury long before daylight, and, until an hour ago, had been moving swiftly up the Great North Road, by way of Stamford, Grantham, and Doncaster to York. There they had turned away to Ripon, where, for an hour, they had eaten and rested. In a basket the waiter had placed some cold food with some bread and a bottle of wine, and this had been duly transferred to the car.

All was now ready for a continuance of the journey.

“Well, Beryl!” exclaimed Ronnie, returning to where the pretty young air-woman was standing before the fire. “All ready—eh?”

“Quite, dear,” was her reply. “You haven’t

forgotten the revolvers, have you?" she asked in a low voice.

"No. There's one for each of us—and one for you if you'd like it," he laughed.

"Yes. I think I'd better have it, dear—one never knows."

"Not much good against a machine-gun, you know!" he laughed. "But a weapon always gives one confidence."

"I've had the flask filled with hot tea," she said. "We shall, no doubt, want it."

"Yes. It will be a coldish job. Are you quite warm enough—quite sure you are?" he asked, as the white-haired old waiter entered the snug, warm coffee-room.

"Quite," she answered, as she drew on her fur-lined gloves.

"Well—good-evening, waiter!" exclaimed Ronnie cheerily.

"Good-evening, sir," replied the old man pleasantly.

Ten minutes later, with Ronnie driving, Beryl snuggled at his side, and Collins seated under the rug in the back of the car, they had passed the dark, imposing façade of the grey, old cathedral and were well out upon the darkening road, through High Berrys and over Hutton Moor. At last they reached Baldersby Gate, where they turned into the long, straight Roman road which runs direct north from York, and, though a continuation of the old Watling Street, is there known as Leeming Lane.

With nightfall there had arisen a cutting north-east wind, that searching breeze which all dwellers in Yorkshire know far too well, comes over with the month of February.

From Baldersby Gate, past Sinderby Station,

through Hope Town on to Leeming village, the ancient road ran straight as an arrow, then, with a slight curve to Leeming Station, it ran on to Catterick. By this time they had passed the race-course, which lay on the left of the road before coming to the cross-roads ; it was already dark, and drawing up at Catterick Bridge Station, Collins got down and lit the head-lamps, Ronald Pryor having a written permission from Whitehall to use them.

Striking across through the town of Richmond they climbed the high hills over Hipswell and Barden Moor to Leyburn, and then down into Wensley Dale, famed for its cheeses, by the northern road which took them through the picturesque village of Redmire on to Askrigg as far as a darkened and lonely inn close to Hardraw Force. There they pulled up, and, entering, asked for something to eat.

By that time, ten o'clock, all three were chilled to the bone, after crossing those wide, open moorlands, where the keen wind cut their faces all the time. The landlady, a stout, cheerful person, soon busied herself to provide creature comforts for the travellers, and within a quarter of an hour all were seated at a substantial meal.

While the good woman was busying herself at table Ronnie suddenly became inquisitive, exclaiming :

“ There's a friend of mine, a Mr. Aylesworth, who often comes up to this neighbourhood. He lives in Leeds, but he rents a cottage somewhere about here. He's a queer and rather lonely man. Do you happen to know him ? ”

“ Oh, yes, sir ! Mr. Aylesworth is quite well known in Hardraw. He has rented old Tom

Dalton's cottage, up on the hill at Simon Stone, for quite eighteen months now."

"Is that far from here?"

"Only about half-a-mile up Buttertubs Pass."

"Buttertubs! What a very curious name!" Beryl remarked. "Where does the pass lead to?"

"Why, straight up over Abbotside Common, just below Lovely Seat, and it comes out on the high road in Swale Dale, close to Thwaite."

"Who is Dalton?" asked the airman.

"Old Farmer Dalton. He's got several cottages on his place. He himself lives over at Gayle, close to Hawes."

"Does my friend Aylesworth ever come in here?"

"Oh, very often, sir!" replied the woman. "Everybody knows him. He's such a real cheerful, good-hearted gentleman. He's always giving away something. It's a sad thing for many about here that there's no treating nowadays."

"Well," laughed Beryl, "the order is, I hear from my friends, very often broken."

"You're right, miss," the broad, round-faced woman admitted. "You can't always prevent it, you know, though we folk do all we can, because of our licenses."

"So my friend Aylesworth is quite popular? I'm glad to hear that," replied Ronnie. "He lives here constantly nowadays, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir! He comes down here just at odd times. Sometimes in the beginning of the week; sometimes for the week-end," was the reply. "He's often up in London—on Government contracts, I've heard him say."

Beryl and her lover exchanged shrewd and meaning glances.

"Yes, I know that Mr. Aylesworth must be very busy," remarked Pryor. "I suppose he comes out here just for quiet and rest?"

"Yes. That's it, sir," replied the inn-keeper's wife. "Only the other day he called in here, and was saying that he was so busy that it was a complete change to come here to the moors for rest and fresh air."

"You've had Zepps over here lately, I've heard. Is that true?" inquired Ronnie.

"Well, they've passed over once or twice, they say, but I've been in bed and asleep. My husband was called up last month, and is now in training down in Kent. Only a week ago he wrote to me saying he hoped I wasn't frightened by them. Somebody down in Kent had evidently spread a report that they had been over here. But I'm thankful to say I heard nothing of them."

"Do you ever get aeroplanes over?" asked Beryl.

"Oh, yes, miss! We get some across in the daytime. They must have an aerodrome somewhere on the coast, I think—but I don't know where it is."

"Do you ever hear anything of them at night?" inquired the girl.

"Well, just now and then. I've been awakened sometimes by the humming of them passing over at night—our patrols, I suppose they are."

Ronald Pryor exchanged another meaning glance with his well-beloved.

"Do they sound quite near?" he asked.

"Oh! quite—unusually low. I suppose they manœuvre across the moors?" she said. "Mr. Benton, the farmer who lives over at Crosslands, quite close here, was only the other day telling me a curious story. He said he was going home

late the other night from Jack Sneath's, when he heard an aeroplane above him, and he saw the machine making some flashlights—signalling to somebody. It flew round and round, hovering and signalling madly. Suddenly, he told me, the aviator cut off his engine, as though he had received an answer, and sailing over the moor, descended somewhere close by, for the hum of the engine was heard no more."

"Curious!" Pryor remarked, again glancing at his well-beloved.

"Oh, no, sir!" replied the smiling woman. "It was only the night manœuvres of our splendid aircraft boys. Really everyone must admire them," she added, unaware of Ronald Pryor's qualifications as an air-pilot.

Ten minutes later all three were out on the road again, travelling along the valley in the direction of Hawes Junction. The night was overcast and very dark, therefore Ronnie was compelled to switch on his head-lights, the road at that part being particularly dangerous.

The country they were now in was a wild and lonely one, with high peaks and wide, desolate moorlands; a sparsely populated district, far removed from the busy workaday world.

They had travelled as far as the old inn called the Moor Cock, where the road branches off to Kirkby Stephen, when Ronnie pulled up, and, turning, ran back again to within a mile of Hardraw. Then finding a convenient grass field, he ran the car in behind a low stone wall, where it was hidden from any passer-by. Then, each taking a flash-lamp and a revolver, they, after shutting off the lights, sought a path which at last they took, climbing up the steep hill-side.

A quarter of an hour's walk brought them to a

narrow, stony lane, which, after another quarter of an hour, led them to a long, low, stone-built cottage, surrounded by a clump of trees.

"That's Dalton's cottage," remarked Ronnie. "It answers exactly to the description we have of it. Now, Collins, you get down on the left, so as to have a good point of view while we watch for anything stirring away on the right."

It was then half-past ten o'clock. Though cold, the night was very still on those lonely moorlands. The house Ronnie and Beryl were approaching was in total darkness, a gloomy, remote place in which the mystery-man from Leeds, George Aylesworth, came for rest and quiet after the business turmoil of the great manufacturing town.

At last Ronald and his companion got up quite close to the house, and finding a spot whence they had a good view of the front door, they crouched beneath an ivy-clad wall, and there, without speaking, waited, knowing that Collins was on watch at the rear of the premises.

Their vigil was a long and weary one until at last the door opened. By the light within there was revealed a tall, lean man in overcoat and golf-cap. Beneath his left arm he carried something long and round, like a cylinder, while in his right hand he had a stout stick.

He came out, closed the door carefully behind him, and then, passing close to where the air-woman and her lover were crouched in concealment, struck away up a steep, narrow path which led up to the summit of the Black Hill. Happily for the watchers the wind had now become rather rough, hence they were able to follow the man Aylesworth—for Ronald recognised him by the description; keeping at a respectful distance, of course, but determinedly dogging his footsteps.

After walking for nearly half-a-mile up a steep ascent, and over a stony path, the man Aylesworth halted at a point which gave a view of the moor, with its fells and dales, for many miles around. From where Ronald halted he could see the man faintly silhouetted against the skyline.

"Look!" whispered Beryl. "What is he doing?"

"Watch," urged her companion.

And as they watched they suddenly saw a beam of intense, white light, a miniature search-light of great brilliance, pierce the darkness skyward. The man Aylesworth was manipulating what they now recognised to be an acetylene signalling apparatus, a cylinder mounted upon a light tripod of aluminium, with a bright reflector behind the gas-jet, and, from the manner that the light began to "wink," three times in quick succession—the Morse letter "S."—there was evidently some shutter arrangement upon it.

Slowly the beam turned from north to south, making the Morse "S." upon the clouds time after time.

Suddenly the light was shut off. For five minutes by Ronald's watch no flicker was shown. Then, once again, the series of "S's." was repeated in a semi-circle from north to south, and back again.

Another five minutes passed in darkness.

Once more the light opened out and commenced to signal the Morse flashes and flares "N. F.," "N. F.," "N. F.," followed by a long beam of light skyward, slowly sweeping in a circle.

Pryor glanced at his watch. It was then exactly midnight. Aylesworth had, no doubt, a rendezvous with someone. His signal could be seen from that point over a radius of fully thirty

miles, or even more, for Ronnie, who understood signalling, was well aware that the portable apparatus being used was one of the most intense and reliable type—one that was, indeed, being used by the German army in Flanders.

For the next half-hour the signals were repeated, until, of a sudden, Beryl's quick ears caught some unusual sound.

"Hark!" she whispered.

Both, on listening intently, heard the low hum of a distant aeroplane in the darkness.

The light was signalling madly, and at the same time the machine, high in the vault of the night sky, was fast approaching. The pair watched, straining their eyes to discover it, but though the sound betrayed its presence, they could not discern its whereabouts until there appeared high over them a small, bright light, like a green star, which repeated the signal "N. F.," "N. F.," half-a-dozen times.

"This is most interesting!" whispered Ronald. "Look! Why, he's planing down."

Beryl watched, and saw how the aeroplane which had come out of the night was now making short spirals, and planing down as quickly as was practicable in that rather dangerous wind.

Every moment the low hum of the engine became more and more distinct as, time after time, signals were shown in response to those flashed by the mysterious man from Leeds. Then ten minutes later the machine, which proved to be a Fokker, came to earth only about fifty yards from where Beryl and Ronald were standing.

Aylesworth ran up breathlessly the moment the machine touched the grass, and with him the watchers crept swiftly up, in order to try to overhear the conversation.

It was in German. The aviator and his observer climbed out of the seats and stood with Mr. Aylesworth, chatting and laughing.

The pilot calmly lit a cigarette, and drawing something from his pocket, gave it to the man who had been awaiting his arrival. Thereupon, Aylesworth, on his part, handed the airman a letter, saying in English :

“That’s all to-night. Please tell Count von Stumnitz that the reply will not be given till Thursday next. By that time we shall have news from the North Sea.”

“Excellent,” replied the aviator, who spoke English perfectly, and who, if the truth were told, had before the war lived the life of a bachelor in Jermyn Street. “I shall be over again on Thursday at midnight punctually. I must run up from the south next time. The anti-aircraft found me on the coast and fired.”

“Well, if you come on Thursday I’ll have the despatch ready.”

Suddenly the observer, who spoke in German, said :

“I have some letters here from the Wilhelmstrasse. Will you post them for me ?”

“Certainly.”

“They are all ready. They are written upon English paper, and English penny stamps are upon them. Therefore, they can be put into any post-box, and will not arouse suspicion. They mostly contain instructions to our good friends who are scattered over Great Britain.”

Aylesworth took from the man’s hand a packet of letters tied with string—secret despatches from the German General Staff to the Kaiser’s spies in Great Britain—and thrust them into the big pocket of his overcoat.

The two Huns and the traitor stood there together in cheery conversation. Much that they said Ronald and Beryl could not overhear. Sometimes there was low whispering, sometimes a burst of hilarious laughter. But it was evident that all three were in perfect accord, and that the aviator and his observer were well-known to Mr. Aylesworth of Leeds.

Far away—many miles off—there showed a faint tremor in the sky, the flash of a distant anti-aircraft searchlight. Now and then it trembled, then all became dark again. The pair of enemies, who that night had landed upon British soil, at last decided that it was high time for them to hie back over the North Sea, therefore they climbed again into their machine—one of the fastest and newest of the Fokker type—and for a few minutes busied themselves in testing their instruments and engine.

The pilot descended again to have a final look round, after which he once more climbed up to his seat, while Aylesworth, acting as mechanic—for, if the truth be told, he had been an aviator's mechanic at Hendon for three years before the outbreak of war—gave the propeller a swing over.

There was a loud roar, the machine leapt forward over the withered heather, bumping along the uneven surface, until, gaining speed, the tail slowly lifted, and after a run of a couple of hundred yards, the Fokker skimmed easily away off the ground.

As Ronnie watched in silence he saw that for another fifty yards the German pilot held her down, and then, with a rush and that quick swoop of which the Fokker is capable, up she went, and away!

She made a circuit of perhaps eight hundred

feet and then sped somewhere into the darkness upon a straight eastward course to the coast, and over the rough North Sea.

As the pair watched, still arm-in-arm, they again saw the faint tremor of our searchlights in the far distance.

“Wouff! Wouff! Wouff!” sounded faintly far away.

The Fokker had been picked up by our anti-aircraft boys, and was being fired upon!

“Wouff! Wouff!” again sounded afar. But the bark of the shell died away, and it seemed plain that the Hun machine had, by a series of side-slips, nose-dives, and quick turns, avoided our anti-aircraft guns, and was well on its way carrying those secret communications to the German General Staff.

The enemy pilot had “streaked off” eastwards, and to sea.

“Now we know this fellow Aylesworth’s game!” whispered Ronnie. “Next Thursday he will be sending away some important message. Therefore, we must be here to have a finger in the enemy’s pie—eh?”

“Certainly, dearest,” replied the gallant little woman at his side. “It certainly is a *coup* for you that you have discovered this secret means of communication between ourselves and the enemy.”

“Not really,” he said in a low voice. “Our people scented the mystery, and have handed it on to me to investigate.”

“Well, we know that something is leaving us on Thursday—some important information.”

“Just so. And is it up to us to see that Aylesworth does not send it across the sea successfully—eh?”

"Let's get away now," urged Beryl. "He may discover us?"

Ronald stood, his arm linked in that of his well-beloved. He made no remark as he watched the dark silhouette of the man Aylesworth disappear over the brow of the hill.

Presently he said:

"Well, dear, he hasn't discovered us. But if all goes well we shall be back here on Thursday."

Half-an-hour later they met Collins awaiting them near the car. The mechanic became greatly interested when his master described briefly what they had seen.

Then all three mounted into their seats, the lights were switched on, and they turned back to Kirkby Stephen, where they spent the remainder of the night at the old "King's Arms," giving a fictitious story of a breakdown.

Two days later, Pryor having made a long written report to the Anti-Aircraft Headquarters, took the train from Liverpool Street Station down to Harbury Court, there to await instructions. Beryl, who was already down there with Iris, was greatly excited, for only she, Ronald, and Collins knew of the intended *coup* next Thursday. Zeppelins had sailed over the East Coast, and had paid the penalty for so doing. "Uncle"—the pet name for Count Zeppelin at the Potsdam Court—was, it was reported, in tears of rage. He had promised the Kaiser that he would appal Great Britain, but the British refused even to be alarmed. The Zeppelin menace, thought by the world to be so serious, had "fizzled out," and it now seemed that the more mobile aeroplane—often with the

British tri-colour rings upon its wings—had taken its place. And it was one of those which Ronnie and Beryl knew would be due over that Yorkshire moor next Thursday at midnight.

Ronnie spent the night at Harbury, and in the morning received a telegram calling him urgently to Whitehall. On his return, he said but little, though, from his smile, Beryl knew that he was satisfied.

Wednesday came, and in his brown overalls he spent nearly the whole day with Collins in "The Hornet's Nest." They were getting the machine in trim for a long night flight.

Both pilot and mechanic consumed many cigarettes as they worked, Ronnie examining every stay and every instrument. He satisfied himself that the Lewis gun, which could fire through the propeller, was in working order, and he tested the silencer, which he brought out from the house for that purpose, and then returned it to its place of safety from the prying eyes of the enemy.

Now and then Beryl came out and watched the preparations.

Thursday dawned grey and overcast, with every indication of rain. Indeed, rain fell at ten o'clock, but at eleven, it having cleared, Ronnie took Collins, and they went up for a "flip" together in order to make a final test.

Beryl and her sister stood in the meadow watching the machine ascend higher and higher, until it had gained an altitude of fully twelve thousand feet. Then it seemed to hover for a moment, after which, with a long, graceful swoop, Ronnie commenced a series of aerial evolutions which Beryl, as an accomplished

air-woman, knew to be most difficult, and showed to her what perfect control Ronald had over the machine. The silencer was on, therefore no sound could be heard of the engines.

In about twenty minutes' time Ronnie came lightly to earth, and pulled up close to where Iris and her sister were standing.

"Everything going finely!" he shouted to Beryl, as he unstrapped himself, and clambered out of the pilot's seat.

Then, when he joined her, he said :

"As the crow flies the spot on the moor is about two hundred and thirty miles from here. Therefore we ought to leave soon after seven in case we lose our way."

Then, after luncheon, they spent the afternoon studying maps and marking directions by which to steer, by the lines of railway mostly. Night flying, with the lights of towns extinguished, is always a difficult matter, and, as Beryl knew by experience, it is extremely easy to lose one's way by a single mistake.

By seven o'clock darkness had already fallen ; but the barometer, at which both had glanced many times with anxious eyes, showed a slow, steady rise, and with the direction of the wind, combined to create excellent conditions for flying at high altitudes.

"The Hornet" had been wheeled out of its "nest," and Beryl in her fur-lined aviation kit, her leather cap and goggles, had strapped herself in behind her lover, who, with a flash-lamp, was now busily examining the row of instruments before him. Meanwhile Collins, on the ground, shouted :

"Best of luck to you, sir, and also to Miss Beryl!"

"Thank you, Collins!" cried the girl. "We ought to be back by five."

"All ready, Collins?" asked Ronnie at last sharply.

The mechanic sprang to the propeller.

"Contact, sir?" he asked.

Ronnie threw over the switch with a click. The mechanic swung the big, four-bladed propeller over, when the engine started with noisy, metallic clatter, increasing until it became a deep roar.

Ronnie was testing his engine. Finding it satisfactory, he quickly throttled down. Collins took the "chocks" from beneath the wheels, and the pilot "taxied" slowly across to the corner of the big field until, gaining speed, he opened up suddenly, when the machine skimmed easily off the ground, over the belt of trees, and away up into the void.

As they ascended, Beryl, gazing down, saw below a few faint lights to the south-east, and knew that there lay the important town of H——, blotted out at even that early hour of the evening, for the lights visible would have only indicated a village in pre-war days.

In the sky further eastwards toward the sea was a slight tremor of light showing that searchlights were already at work testing their beams, and making oblong patches of light upon the clouds.

At ten thousand feet up, as the altimeter then showed, it was intensely cold, and the girl buttoned up her fur-lined coat and fastened up her wind-cuffs. The roar of the engine was too great, of course, to admit of conversation. Ronnie had not switched on the silencer, as it impeded speed, and after a long flight it might choke just at the very moment when its services were most required.

Due north in the increasing darkness went "The Hornet," skilfully handled by the most

intrepid of air-pilots, high over town, forest, and pasture, hill and dale, as the hours crept slowly on.

Suddenly, however, Ronnie turned the machine, and began to circle over a few scattered lights. Then Beryl recognised his uncertainty. Time after time he searched for the railway line to York, but though both of them strained their eyes they could not pick it up again.

Hence they were compelled, much to Ronnie's chagrin, to make a descent in a big grass-field, where, in the blackness, they made a rather rough landing, and presently inquired their whereabouts of some villagers.

To their amazement they found that beneath the hill where they had descended the railway line actually ran. And it was on account of the long tunnel they had missed it.

So, ascending once more, they struck again due north by the compass, and finding the line, flew along it over Doncaster to York. Then, still continuing northwards, they reached Thirsk Junction, until five minutes later as they were approaching Northallerton, intending to strike westward and follow the line to Hawes, "The Hornet" developed serious engine trouble, and Ronnie was forced again to descend, planing down into an unploughed field.

For half-an-hour, aided actively by Beryl, he was occupied in making a repair. It was then past eleven, and the girl expressed a hope that they would be at the rendezvous by midnight.

"It will really be too bad if we arrive too late," she added apprehensively.

Ronnie did not reply. He was seriously contemplating giving up the expedition. The engine trouble was a very serious one. They might

last out perhaps another hour, but "The Hornet" could never return to Harbury with the engine in that state. This distressing fact, however, he did not tell her.

"Hark!" cried Beryl suddenly. "Listen! Why, there's a machine up—over us!"

Ronald held his breath. Yes, there was the distinct hum of a machine coming up from the east, following the railway from the main line over towards Hawes.

"Oh! do let's go up. That may be Aylesworth's friend," suggested Beryl.

"I expect it is," replied Ronnie grimly. "But with this engine there is danger—very grave danger—Beryl, dear. Are you quite prepared to risk it?"

"I'll risk anything with you," was the girl's prompt reply. "We've risked our lives in the air before, and we'll do so again to-night. We must not fail now that we're within an ace of success."

Her words spurred Ronnie to a supreme effort. With the hum of the mysterious machine in his ears, he set his teeth; then with the spanner in his hand he screwed the nut tightly, and without many further words he told his well-beloved that all was ready. They both got in, and two minutes later they were rising in the air, rapidly overhauling the mysterious machine.

Those moments seemed hours to Beryl. She scarcely dared to breathe. Ronnie had switched on the silencer, and they were now speeding through the air without a sound, save for the shrill whistle of the wind through the planes.

By the hum of the engine of the machine they were following they kept silently in its wake, gradually overhauling it.

Suddenly they saw flashes of white light from it—signals to the traitor Aylesworth in waiting below. Then they knew that they were not mistaken.

Ronnie put every ounce into his crocked-up engine, knowing that if it failed they might make a nose-dive fatal to them both. Like an arrow he sped towards the aeroplane which had crept over the North Sea, and across Yorkshire to meet the man who had promised those secret despatches.

Beryl saw deep below the flashes of a lamp—"N. F.," "N. F.," in Morse.

Ronald Pryor saw it also and, suddenly turning the nose of his machine, he made a circle in silence around the enemy aeroplane. Again he circled much nearer. The German pilot was utterly ignorant of his presence, so silently did he pass through the air, until, narrowing the circle, he waited for the Fokker to plane down; then, in a flash, he flew past, and, with his hand upon the Lewis gun, he showered a veritable hail of lead upon it.

The Fokker reeled, and then nose-dived to earth, with—as was afterwards found—its pilot shot through the brain, its petrol-tank pierced in five places, and one of its wings hanging limp and broken, such a terrible shower of lead had Pryor directed against it.

Beryl and Ronald Pryor had perforce to return by train to Harbury, but, by previous arrangement, the man Aylesworth had been arrested, and was duly tried by court-martial. It is known that he was found guilty and condemned, but the exact sentence upon him will probably not be known until after the declaration of peace.

And, after all, the doom of a traitor is best left unrecorded.

CHAPTER V.

CONCERNS THE HIDDEN HAND.

ONE evening—the evening of June 14th, 1916, to be exact—Ronald Pryor came forth through one of the long French windows which led out upon the sloping lawn at Harbury Court, and gazed out upon the extensive and picturesque landscape; the low ridge of hills was soft in the grey and crimson of the summer afterglow.

With Beryl, and Iris, he had dined an hour ago, after which Beryl had gone for a flight in “The Hornet.” She had been away more than half-an-hour when, seated alone, he drained his liqueur, placed his cigarette-end in the ash-tray, and glanced anxiously at his wrist-watch.

Then he had gone out into the calm June night.

Passing from the spacious gardens surrounding the Court—ill-kept nowadays, for all the men were serving in the Army—he went down to “The Hornet’s Nest.”

He opened the sliding door sufficiently to allow himself to enter, and for the next hour he was busy within. At last he reappeared with an old, wide-mouthed kitbag, similar to those used by hunting men in pre-war days.

Carrying it across the field to the opposite corner, he opened it beneath the high elm-tree which they were always compelled to avoid in their ascents or descents. Then he took out a coil of black-enamelled wire, the end of which bore a lead plummet. Carefully examining the coil, he held it loosely in his hand and, stepping back a few paces, quickly swung the lead around

his head half-a-dozen times, and then, with a sudden jerk, released it, sending it high up into the branches of the tree, where it remained with its wire attached. A few feet down the wire, towards the ground, there had been inserted a brown porcelain insulator, while, as the airman paid out the wire, receding from the tree as he did so, a second insulator came into view.

Having let out sufficient wire, he at last pegged its end to the ground. Thus, from the grass to the tree, stretched up a long single wire. From his square-mouthed bag he took out a small box of polished mahogany and, opening it, there was disclosed within a complete little wireless set. A small mat of copper gauze he took also from the bag and, spreading it upon the damp grass as an "earth," he connected up his instruments with expert hand.

Presently he glanced at the watch on his wrist ; by this time the twilight was rapidly falling, the mists were rising, and a few sparks of light could be seen twinkling deep down in the grey valley. Then he removed his cap and, assuming the double head 'phones, carefully adjusted his detector and listened attentively.

From anyone passing along the high road he was entirely hidden from view. The possession of wireless was forbidden under heavy penalty by the Defence of the Realm Act, but Ronnie Pryor was one of the fortunate few whose permits for experiment had been recently renewed by the Admiralty.

"H'm!" he exclaimed aloud. "There's Norddeich going strong, sending out the usual German official lies—and also the Eiffel Tower. Two budgets of official war news at the same time!"

Again he listened with great patience and attention, as he knelt upon the grass. The neat little installation was, of course, for receiving only, there being no electrical current for transmission. A small, round ebonite handle at the end of the box he turned backwards and forwards very slowly, altering his wave-length ever and anon, making it longer or shorter in order to "tune" himself to the message he was apparently expecting.

Once again he glanced at his watch very anxiously. Then, for the next three-quarters of an hour, while the dusk deepened into darkness, he remained upon his patient vigil.

"At last!" he gasped aloud, as he switched on a little shaded lamp which shone obliquely within the box; then he bent down, and, on a small writing-pad, began to take down rapidly the letters he heard in Morse code—an unintelligible jumble of the alphabet, each nine letters being separated by a space.

Presently there ticked into his ears the three "shorts," followed by "long-short-long," which signified "end of work." Still bending to the tiny light, he took from his pocket a little book. On consulting it, he placed over each code-letter its de-coded equivalent, afterwards reading it to his apparent satisfaction.

Then he rose, standing with his face to the north, and gazing over the wide valley into the night sky. He lit a cigarette, and remained there for a full quarter of an hour. Afterwards he consulted a map from his pocket and then, lighting another cigarette, waited somewhat impatiently. Now and then he could hear the roar of a car or a motor-cycle passing along the high road at the back of him.

About three-quarters of an hour after the reception of the message, Pryor connected up four dry batteries he had in his bag to a lamp with a wide lens, which he placed on its back upon the ground, so that the beams were directed upwards. Then again, after pulling down the wire, he seated himself upon a root of the great tree and waited, listening very attentively.

At last he heard a faint hum in the darkness—a low sound like the distant buzzing of a bee.

It was approaching rapidly—an aeroplane high in the dark sky, for neither moon nor stars showed that night. The machine was approaching from the direction of London, yet, though he strained his eyes, he could not distinguish it in that dark-blue vault above.

On it came rapidly in his direction. Into the electric circuit he had put a little tapping-key and, touching it, he tapped out the Morse letters: “X X D”—his own wireless call number.

Time after time he repeated the call “X X D—X X D!” at the same time straining his eyes into the darkness.

Suddenly, almost exactly above him, he saw, like a tiny star in the sky, a light twinkling. He read the message, and knew that his signal had been seen and read.

Next second he tapped out upon the key—flashing it to the arriving aeroplane—the direction of the light wind, afterwards opening up the light to serve as a guide. The aeroplane, humming above in the darkness, swept down lower and lower in half-mile spirals until, of a sudden, a powerful searchlight beamed out from it, directed upon the earth below; its pilot was looking for a safe landing-place.

Slowly it circled round and round until, a few

minutes later, it came to earth in the opposite corner of the field to that in which Ronnie was standing. In an instant, with the cessation of the throbbing of the engine, the light was shut off, and Pryor, having long ago packed up his wireless, hastened across.

"Hullo!" he shouted into the darkness.

"Hullo, Ronnie!" answered a girl's voice cheerily, and a few seconds later Beryl Gaselee received a warm and fond caress.

"I got your message all right, darling!" the man exclaimed, while the girl, in her workman-like air-woman's kit, stood before the propeller and stretched her arms above her head after her long flight away into Hampshire and back. By the light of Ronnie's flash-lamp she was revealed in her leather flying-cap, her hair tucked away beneath it, her mackintosh confined at the waist by a wide belt, and, instead of a skirt, brown mechanic's overalls.

"I came across Bedford and St. Albans, but just beyond I had a terrible fright. I was flying low in order to pick up a railway-line when, of a sudden, a searchlight opened up from somewhere and I was attacked by two anti-aircraft guns. One shell whistled within five yards of the left plane of 'The Hornet.' Indeed, it was quite a miracle that I was not winged."

"But couldn't the fools see the rings on the planes? Didn't you bank in order to show them?"

"Of course I did, but I was in a cloud, and they could not see me with any accuracy. You see, I never gave word to headquarters that I was going up. I quite forgot it."

"Oh, well, in that case it is only natural that they would fire upon any stray aircraft at night!"

Ronnie replied. "But I got your message all right, which proves that our wireless works well. Where were you when you sent it?"

"I had flown about ten miles beyond Oxford. I had some trouble with the engine, so I was late in starting," she replied. "You left your kit in the machine," she added, and, climbing again into "The Hornet," she threw out a leather cap and a heavy mackintosh.

"Did you hear anything suspicious?" she asked, as he placed the bag containing the wireless in the observer's seat.

"Yes," he replied. "It was just as we have guessed—enemy messages on a short wave-length. Not very plain, to be sure, but they are being transmitted, without a doubt. I heard you perfectly," he added. "But we haven't much time to waste if we are to keep the appointment."

"The 'bus is going beautifully," Beryl said. "I should have had quite a pleasant trip if it were not for the 'Archie-fire.'"

"They may believe that the enemy send aeroplanes over to us at night painted to resemble ours. That is the reason you got peppered, no doubt," he said. "We must give that station a wide berth in future."

Climbing into the pilot's seat he examined the map set beneath the small electric bulb, and afterwards slipped on his airman's coat and cap, and buckled the strap round his waist. Then, after she had swung over the propeller, he helped his well-beloved into the observer's seat into which she strapped herself.

With a quick bumpy run they sped over the pasture, and then, on the lower ground, they rose with a roar of the engine, turned and, passing

over the high road, circled over the opposite hill. Higher and higher Ronnie went up into the starless darkness, making great circles in order to get up five thousand feet.

As the speed increased in the darkness the machine, thrusting its nose still upwards and lying over resolutely in its long spiral climb, throbbed onward until, at a thousand feet, there came to both a delicious sense of relief as they moved along on an even keel.

For over an hour they flew until they were high above the long, steep High Street of Guildford, where only a few twinkling lights could be seen below, owing to the excellent precautions of its Chief Constable. At that altitude, from the number of lights, an enemy airman would never have suspected it to be a town at all.

It was not long, however—even while they were circling above the town and Ronnie was taking his bearings—before two intense beams from searchlights shot out and almost blinded the aviators. For fully two minutes the lights followed them. Then the watchers below, having satisfied themselves that it was a friendly 'plane, shut off again, and all was darkness.

They had flown perhaps nine miles from Guildford when, of a sudden, almost directly below them, there sprang up four points of red light—lit simultaneously by an electrical wire—which showed them their landing-place.

Down they swept until Ronnie, an expert in landing at night, found himself in a large grass-field. Collins came running forward eagerly to welcome him.

The four lights were at once extinguished, and the engine being shut off, all was quiet again.

“Well, sir, I think you’re quite right,” Collins

said at last. "I've been watching these two days, and there's something mysterious in the wind?"

"Have you seen them?" asked Ronnie eagerly.

"Yes. A youngish man and a stout old woman. When I got down I found Shawfield to be only a tiny place with one old inn, The Bell, and I knew that a stranger's movements would be well watched. So I went three miles farther, and took a room at The George, in Bricklehurst."

"How far is the farm from here?" asked Beryl.

"Oh, about a mile—not more, miss! Behind that wood yonder," he replied. "They had a visitor this afternoon—a tall, fair, well-dressed man. He's probably spending the night there. I watched him arrive at Shawfield Station, and the man who calls himself Cator met him, and drove him in the car to the Manor Farm."

"I wonder who the visitor is?" remarked Pryor.

"He is probably one of the gang," Beryl suggested. "No doubt he has come down from London to see them in secret. The woman poses as Cator's mother, I believe."

"Yes, miss. I've discovered that they bought the Manor Farm in 1913, and that Cator had an excellent assistant, a Belgian, it was supposed—or at least he gave himself out to be that. Cator erected new farm-buildings that you will see—nice, red-brick structures with corrugated iron roofs, and spent a large sum of money on improvements."

"New buildings—eh?" sniffed Ronnie in suspicion.

"Yes, that's just the point, sir. But let's get over there, and I'll show you one or two things that I regard as suspicious."

Thereupon the pair, guided by Collins, threw

off their air-clothes and crossed the field to a gate where a footpath led into a dark wood, the air-mechanic switching on a pocket-torch to light their way. They conversed only in whispers, lest there should be anyone lurking in the vicinity, and on traversing the wood, found themselves out upon a broad highway. Then, after going perhaps a quarter of a mile, they turned into a second wood and continued through it until, at its farther boundary, they saw before them, silhouetted against the night sky, a cluster of farm-buildings, with the farmhouse itself close by.

"Hush!" urged Collins. Then, drawing his companions near him, he halted and whispered, "See that long building—away from the others? That's where the mystery lies!"

They both strained their eyes, and could see distinctly the long, low-built structure straight before them.

"Follow me," Collins whispered. "Be careful to make no noise. There are two dogs in the yard yonder, but they're chained up."

"That's a mercy!" Beryl remarked, as the pair moved slowly after the mechanic.

Suddenly, when they came out upon an ill-made track which was evidently a byway, Collins stopped and, turning his flash-lamp upon the ground, pointed out the recent marks of wheels, the broad, flat-tyred wheels of a motor-lorry."

"See what's been here of late—eh?" he whispered. "Look!" and he slowly flashed the light across the road. "It's been here quite half-a-dozen times recently—on different nights or days."

"Yes," replied Ronnie. "You are quite right! Do those tracks lead up to the building?"

“ Yes. Come and see.”

They went, and before the big, heavy doors which were locked so securely they saw, by the faint light the man showed, marks of where the lorry had backed right into the building.

“ Then it must have a concrete floor ! ” remarked Ronnie as he examined the tracks intently. “ Several lorries have been here, without a doubt. But might they not have been carting grain away ? ”

“ No. Because no threshing has been done here for over two years.”

“ Dare we go near the house ? ” Beryl asked.

“ No, miss ; it wouldn’t be wise. We’d have to pass through the yard, and the dogs would give tongue at once.”

“ Oh, we mustn’t alarm them ! ” Ronnie said. “ If we are to be successful we must do everything in secret and spring a real surprise. Only,” he added, “ we must make quite certain that they are guilty.”

“ Of course,” Beryl agreed. “ But how ? ”

“ Ah, that’s the point ! ” said Ronnie, taking out his own torch, and again examining the tracks of the lorry in the soft ground. With the aid of a folding foot-rule he drew forth from his pocket, he took measurements at several points in the road, then said :

“ It is not always the same lorry that comes here. One is heavier than the other. The one which came most recently is the larger of the two, and from the depth of the rut it must have been loaded to its capacity. See there, where it sank into a soft place ! ”—and he indicated a spot where one wheel had sunk in very deeply.

“ Further,” he went on, “ I judge, by the recent dry weather, that those lorries have been here at

intervals of about three days. They came from some considerable distance, no doubt. The last was here yesterday, in which case the next would be here the day after to-morrow."

"Then I can stay and see with my own eyes?" suggested Collins.

"Exactly my idea," his master replied. "You could be an actual witness, and make a statement before I dare act."

At that moment all three were startled by hearing voices. People were coming out of the farmhouse. The dogs in the yard barked—showing that the voice of one of the persons was that of a stranger—the man from London.

"Quick!" cried Collins. "Let's get into hiding somewhere. I hope they won't let those infernal dogs loose, or they'll soon scent us out!"

"I hope not!" said Beryl, who, though a lover of dogs, held farm dogs, in such circumstances, in distinct suspicion.

All three sped quickly back, crouching behind a wooden fence close by, just as the fitful light of a lantern could be seen approaching. Three persons were revealed—the man Cator, his guest, and the fat old woman.

Ronnie and Beryl strained their ears to catch their conversation, but at first they could not distinguish a single word.

Suddenly the woman, with a loud laugh, spoke more distinctly. Yes! She spoke in German, the man from London answering in the same language!

They walked to the door of the long, low building which, after some difficulty, the man Cator unlocked, leaving his old hurricane-lamp outside. The trio went in; therefore it was plain one of them carried an electric torch.

"I suppose they are showing him their handiwork—eh?" remarked Beryl in a whisper.

"No doubt. He has come down from London to make an inspection, it seems."

They could hear voices speaking in German within the building, but dared not emerge from their place of concealment to peer within. Ronnie had suggested it, but Beryl urged a judicious course.

"No, let Collins remain and watch," she said in a whisper. "Every moment we remain here means graver peril to our plans. If they scent the slightest suspicion, then all our efforts will be in vain. Have you noticed over there? I've been looking at it for some minutes, and I don't think my eyes deceive me."

"What?" asked Ronnie.

"Why, look at that chimney-stack upon the farmhouse! Can't you see something—a wire running from it right away to that high tree on the left?"

"Yes—by Gad! That's so, Beryl! Why, they've got wireless here! They evidently string up an aerial at night!"

"Well, I haven't noticed that before!" said Collins. "But no doubt you're right, sir. That's a wireless aerial, without question."

"Yes. But let's get away," Ronnie urged. "They may release those horrible dogs for a run, and then it would be all up."

So the trio, creeping cautiously, receded by the dark path along which they had reached the Manor Farm, and were soon back again in the Monk's Wood, as Collins told them it was named.

Back again at the spot where they had left "The Hornet" they held council.

"You remain here, Collins," said Pryor.

"Watch the place, and see what arrives. The next lorry may come along the day after tomorrow, or the day after that. You will see what its load is. Then, having made certain, come back straight to Harbury. We'll wait for you there. Telephone me, but not from the locality. You understand?"

"Very well, sir," replied the air-mechanic, who, in a rather shabby blue suit, wore a brass badge as one doing national work.

Ronnie and Beryl climbed back into the machine, fastened the straps round themselves, and made all ready for their long flight from Surrey, across London, to Harbury Court.

They said good-bye to Collins, who, taking the propeller, pulled it over, while Pryor threw over the contact.

There was no response.

"Hullo! What's up?" asked Ronnie.

"Don't know, sir," Collins said. "Try again."

They both tried again—and again, but no response could be got out of the engine. "The Hornet" had lost its sting!

Both pilot and observer descended again to make a minute investigation. Both of them were conversant with every point of an aero-engine, but neither could discover the fault. "The Hornet" had simply broken down!

For nearly an hour the trio worked hard to get a move on the engine, but without success.

At last Ronald declared that it would be best to wait until dawn, so they sat down upon the grass beneath the hedge, smoking cigarettes and chatting.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ronnie. "If it is really true what we suspect, how we shall surprise them—eh?"

"Yes, dear," said his well-beloved. "But Collins must have absolute and undeniable evidence."

"Of course. We cannot act without that. See over there—the faint light in the sky."

And he pointed to the pale light, eastward, which heralded the dawn.

Already the birds were twittering, and away somewhere a dog was barking furiously. In pre-war times the chimes of village church clocks would have struck the hour. But now, in fear of enemy aircraft, all chimes were silent.

Slowly the light stole over the hill, and presently all three walked over to "The Hornet" for another minute examination. Within ten minutes Collins had found the fault—quite a usual but unexpected one—and five minutes afterwards the engine was ready for the ascent.

Pryor climbed into the pilot's seat to test it, and did so half-a-dozen times before he pronounced his verdict that the machine was in a fit condition to fly back over London.

At last, when Ronnie and Beryl had climbed in and settled themselves, the mechanic swung over the propeller, the engine roared, and a few moments later they had left the earth, speeding higher and higher in the direction of London, on their return to Harbury Court.

Collins, as soon as they had left, wound up the electric wires connecting the little tin pans of petrol at each corner of the field, and hid the pans themselves in the hedge. Then, having removed all traces of the machine's presence there, he started back on his three-mile walk to the obscure little village in which he had taken up his quarters.

Next day he relaxed his vigilance on the Manor

Farm and, with an elderly man, a retired schoolmaster whom he had met in the bar of The George, he went for a day's fishing in the river which ran outside the village.

The old man, whose name was Haddon, had a wide knowledge of local affairs, and as soon as Collins mentioned Mrs. Cator and her son, he exclaimed :

" Ah ! They had a very good manager in Mr. Bush, but he went away about a month before the war. He was a German, though he called himself Belgian."

" How do you know he was a German ? " asked Collins.

" Well, because my daughter's in the post-office here, and she says that once or twice letters came for him bearing a Dutch stamp, and addressed to ' Herr Büch,' which is a German name."

" Yes. That's curious, isn't it ? "

" And there were some other curious facts, too. Before the war two foreigners very often came down to the Manor Farm to spend the week-end—gentlemen from London. I met them once or twice and heard them speaking in German."

" But Mr. Cator isn't German, is he ? " asked Collins.

" Who knows ? Some Germans who've lived here for years speak English so well that you can't tell," declared the ex-schoolmaster.

" Have you any reason for supposing that Cator is a German ? " inquired Collins. " If he's German, then what about his mother ? "

" Well, it doesn't follow that his mother is German. She may have been an English girl who married a German, you know."

" If so, she certainly might be pro-German,"

Collins remarked, as they sat together on the river-bank eating their sandwiches.

"I certainly think she is, because my daughter tells me that old Emma Green's girl, who was housemaid at the Manor Farm when war was declared, says that Mrs. Cator, her son, and one of those gentlemen from London drank the health of the Kaiser in champagne that night."

"Did the girl tell your daughter that?"

"Yes, she did. And I believe her."

Collins was silent. These facts he had learnt were highly important.

"You see," Mr. Haddon went on, "nowadays you dare not say anything about anybody you suspect, for fear of being had up for libel. The law somehow seems to protect the Germans in our midst. I feel confident that the Cators are a mysterious pair, and I told my suspicions to Mr. Rouse, our police-sergeant in the village. But he only shrugged his shoulders and said that as far as he knew they were all right. So why, after that, should anybody trouble?"

"Is it not an Englishman's duty to oust the enemy?" Collins queried.

"Yes, it is; but if the enemy can live under laws which protect them, what can the average man do?"

"Why, do his best to assist the authorities! The latter are not so blind as they lead the public to believe, I assure you," laughed Collins, who, having learnt all he could from the ex-school-master, devoted the remainder of the afternoon to angling, and with fair result.

Next day he strolled, at about ten o'clock in the morning, in the direction of the Manor Farm, apparently taking a morning walk. When he had gone about a quarter of a mile, he met the man

Cator in a golf suit and cap, accompanied by the stranger who had come from London two days previously, and a third man, tall, elderly, with a short, greyish beard, and rather shabbily-dressed.

As they passed, Collins felt instinctively that the grey-bearded man, having eyed him closely, made some remark to his companions which caused them to turn back and look after him. The air-mechanic was, however, too discreet to turn himself, but went on and, walking in a circle, gave the Manor Farm a wide berth.

That evening, however, as soon as it grew dark, he approached the place, taking up his position at the same spot where he had stood with his master and Miss Beryl—a point from which he had a good view of the long, low farm-building.

He sank down into some undergrowth which concealed him and lit a cigarette, there being nobody near to smell the smoke. It was eight o'clock when he arrived there, and the time passed very slowly. Now and then the dogs in the yard barked furiously, once at hearing his footsteps, and again when somebody opened the back door of the farmhouse and came outside. Now and then a horse neighed, and once a dog barking far away set the two watch-dogs barking in response.

The hours went by, but Collins, lying on his back sometimes smoking, sometimes dozing, kept a most patient vigil.

Suddenly, however, just before midnight, as a glance at his watch revealed, he heard the sound of a car coming up the hill. He sprang up and listened. It was coming up behind him—up the byway which led through the wood to the farm !

His heart beat quickly. Pryor had been right. A lorry visited the Manor Farm every three days.

Suddenly he caught a glimpse of the oil side-lights, and a few minutes later a big motor-lorry, heavily laden, approached and backed towards the wide doors of the farm-building. The driver having blown his horn, Cator and his visitor came out, and, when the doors were unlocked and wheeled open, the lorry was backed right into the building.

At once all three men began unloading the lorry, whereupon Collins crept up to ascertain what was being taken out.

Crouching behind the lorry he saw a number of full petrol tins being handed out and stored away within, after which came small, square wooden cases, which were handled very gingerly, and placed quietly upon the concrete floor of the well-filled building. Each case bore a red disc, and by the manner in which the driver warned Cator and his friend who handled them, Collins learnt that they were high explosives.

The lorry had been practically laden with these cases, save for twenty tins of petrol, and all were safely transferred into the store. After this the driver went into the house for some refreshment, and in the meantime Collins, by the aid of his flash-lamp, was enabled to slip inside the building and make a quick examination of its contents.

What he saw showed plainly that within that place was stored a great quantity of petrol and explosives—an enemy base for the use of the Huns who so vainly hoped one day to reach Britain.

Two minutes later, ere the trio again emerged

from the house, the air-mechanic was on his way back to the inn at Bricklehurst, well satisfied.

On the following Friday, at nine o'clock in the evening, Beryl climbed into "The Hornet," which stood in its meadow behind Harbury Court ready for a night flight. It had been a strenuous day getting ready, but the machine was now in perfect running order.

Ronnie, in his air-kit with leather cap and big goggles, climbed in and buckled the strap round his waist.

"Well, let's hope for good luck!" cried Beryl standing at the propeller.

"Right, darling!" replied Ronnie. "Let her rip!"

Next moment the girl swung round the propeller. Then she climbed in, and a few moments later the 'plane sped over the grass and soon crossed the roof of the house, and was away.

An hour later, with the lever of the silencer thrown back, they were hovering noiselessly, having passed over Guildford and away south, above a fire they saw below them—a hay-rick which belonged to the Catons. Collins had ignited it at a given time that night, in order to serve as their guide. The rick was in a field fully half-a-mile from the farm, and from above Ronnie and his companion could see that the local fire brigade were around it.

The light, however, plainly illuminated the Manor Farm, and the building containing the secret store. Twice Ronnie passed over it, flying high, then once again he crossed directly above the farm. His hand was upon one of the little levers controlling his bombs, but, seeing that he had passed slightly to the south, he turned her nose, and re-passed once again in silence.

Suddenly he touched the three upper levers in swift succession, one after the other.

There was a swish of air below in the darkness, and as they watched, three blood-red flashes showed far down almost simultaneously.

A noise like an earthquake rent the air, a great column of flame shot up, and a huge explosion resulted, lighting the country for miles around, and sending *débris* high into the darkness, while at the same time the terrible concussion tilted up "The Hornet" until she very nearly had a nasty side-slip.

Ronnie opened up his searchlight, shining it down upon the farm, revealing to their gaze only a wrecked and burning mass of ruins. The whole place, including the farmhouse, had, by the terrible force of the explosives stored there in secret, been swept clean away and levelled to the ground.

A few minutes later "The Hornet" turned upon her homeward flight, and to this day it is very naturally believed by the public that enemy aircraft visited the spot on that memorable night.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRICE OF VICTORY.

THE wintry night was dark and moonless. There was a slight ground mist—and consequently no wind.

Ronald Pryor returned to Harbury Court late for dinner, where Beryl and her sister awaited him. He had had a fagging day in London, spending nearly half his time with officials of the Air Department, who had at last become

interested in his new engine silencer. Trials of it had been made at Farnborough and elsewhere, and proof of its effectiveness had been quite adequate.

"The Department have decided to adopt it!" he announced triumphantly to Beryl as he entered the long, old-fashioned stone hall, and hung up his overcoat.

"I knew they would, dear!" cried the enthusiastic air-woman joyously.

"I only hope the secret won't leak out to the enemy," he said, and then went along to wash his hands before sitting down to dinner.

Presently, while they were at table, and Ronnie was describing the interview he had had with the heads of three Government Departments and the reading of the confidential reports upon the tests made with aeroplanes to which the silencer had been fitted, the maid entered announcing that he was wanted on the telephone.

He left the table, and five minutes later returned with a grave look upon his countenance.

"What's the matter, dear?" asked Beryl anxiously, for she dreaded lest something was amiss.

For a few moments he did not answer, busying himself with his plate. Then at last, he replied:

"Oh!—well, only that I am flying 'The Hornet' again to-night."

"May I not go with you?" Beryl asked eagerly. "Do let me go. It is over a week since I went up."

He hesitated. Truth to tell, what he had heard on the telephone caused him some misgivings. Over the wire a certain disguised message had been given to him from headquarters—a request to which he had acceded.

Beryl was in entire ignorance of the affair. He

had been asked to regard it as strictly confidential, hence, he had not mentioned it, even to his well-beloved.

"Look here, dearest," he said at last, looking across the big bowl of flowers in the centre of the table, "I don't half like you coming with me to-night. There may be risk, and it is unfair that you should take it."

"We are engaged, Ronnie; therefore, if there is any danger, why should I not share it?" was her prompt reply. "I am not afraid while I am with you."

"That's quite the right spirit, Beryl," remarked her sister, approvingly.

"I quite appreciate your bravery, little one," said Ronnie, "but flight on this misty night is fraught with more danger than people ever imagine. Once you are up you are lost, except for your compass. And to descend is, as you know, full of perils."

"I quite appreciate all that," said Beryl. "Don't you recollect when I came over from Sandgate to Folkestone, and found a thick fog on this side? Well, I went on till I found a break in it on the Surrey Downs, and descended quite safely at Ash, near Aldershot."

"That was in daylight—not on a dark night like this?"

"But where are you going?" she inquired.

To her question he remained silent. His was a mission in strict confidence.

Further argument followed between the pair, until at last, by the time dinner had ended, Ronald Pryor was compelled to accede to her request.

Then, taking a flash-lamp, he went forth

across the big meadow to the hangar and found Collins awaiting him.

"All ready, sir," the latter announced cheerily. "I heard you quite well on the 'phone from London, but—well, sir," he added hesitatingly, "it's a bit risky to fly to-night, isn't it?"

"Is the machine all in order—everything?" asked his master.

"Everything, sir. She only requires wheeling out," and as he uttered the words the mechanic opened the great sliding-doors of the hangar.

Then, together, the two men wheeled out the aeroplane, and while Ronnie mounted into the pilot's seat Collins swung over the propeller, and his master tuned up his engine.

Meanwhile, Beryl having put on her air-woman's kit, with the leather jacket and cap, joined her lover, whom she found in the hangar poring over a map showing the East Coast between the Wash and the estuary of the Thames.

He was taking measurements and making some pencilled calculations, while she stood expectantly beside him.

"Well, dear!" he asked at last, "are you ready?"

"Quite!" was her reply, and a few moments later, after he had put on his muffler, his overalls, and leather coat, they both climbed into the machine, and strapped themselves in.

"Light the flares about two o'clock, Collins. I'm making a pretty long flight, so we can't be back before then."

"Very well, sir."

Then, tuning up again, and having tried the silencer, and found it in good working order,

he ran the machine swiftly across the frosty grass. Soon he rose, and, skimming the trees, soon soared away into the darkness.

From where Beryl sat she saw the glow of the little electric bulb set over the instruments shining into her lover's strong clean-shaven face, and, by the compass, gathered that they had described a half-circle, and, though still rising rapidly, were now heading eastward in the direction of the sea. The roar of the engine, of course, rendered speech impossible, while the mist was very chilly causing her to draw her brown woollen comforter around her cheeks. There was no sign of light anywhere below—all was a great black void.

They had flown for nearly half-an-hour when, of a sudden, the long beam of a searchlight shot up from somewhere on their left, and began slowly to search the sky. Their approach had been heard by one of our air-stations.

Ronnie, watching the light made no attempt to evade it. Indeed, he switched on his searchlights in order to reveal himself. He had no wish to be peppered by our "Archies."

Next second both of them were blinded by the searchlight full upon them. In a moment a second, and then a third, light converged upon them, so that the aviator and his well-beloved were compelled to shade their eyes with their gloved hands.

For a full three minutes the lights followed them, when the watchers below, having examined the tri-coloured rings on "The Hornet's" planes and being satisfied, shut off.

Beryl saw that her lover was anxiously watching his altimeter, as well as his compass and clock.

It seemed as though he were apprehensive of something.

Suddenly he began to descend, and pulled across the lever controlling the silencer, thus cutting off the noise of the exhaust.

"We're over the sea, now," he remarked; "can't you feel the difference in the atmosphere? Look on the left."

She did so, peering down into the darkness, and there saw the twinkling of a light—a ship was signalling rapidly, being answered by another not far away.

"Where are we going, dear?" Beryl inquired.

"On a mission," was his abrupt response. And, though she pressed him for information, he would vouchsafe no further reply.

For a full hour they flew over the North Sea, due east, until suddenly they turned south, and with the silencer still on, went along noiselessly save for the shrill wind whistling in the struts.

From ten thousand feet they had now descended to a little over two thousand, when, all of a sudden, a distant searchlight shot forth.

"That's the Belgian coast!" Ronnie remarked, and once again he started to ascend, flying in a complete circle and undecided as to exactly where he might be. The single shaft of light, like a moving line in the total darkness, was soon followed by others from the same neighbourhood. Circles of light could be seen, showing that the clouds were low—a fact which would favour the intrepid pair.

"We'll give those lights a wide berth for a little," Ronnie said cheerfully, and again he turned northward, and a little later to the south-east.

As they flew they watched those slowly-moving searchlights until, one by one, they disappeared.

"They've finished their sweep of the skies," he said at last, with satisfaction. "If there's no alarm they won't open out again for some time."

And then he flew in the direction of where the lights had been, descending until he was again only about two thousand feet above the sea.

"From the disposition of those lights it seems that we are near our objective," he remarked. "I hope you are not nervous, darling?"

"Why should I be with you, Ronnie?" she asked, placing her gloved hand tenderly upon his shoulder.

"Well, because we're now entering the danger-zone," he replied, "and I think I ought not to conceal it from you. Would you like to turn back?"

"Turn back!" echoed the brave girl. "Never! Where you dare go, I will go too. Don't think I'm in the least nervous. If anything happens, it will happen equally to both of us."

"Well spoken, my darling," he said, his hand touching her cheek in the darkness. "Then we will go forward."

After that there was a long silence, until below they saw a cluster of faint lights, with one light flashing at regular intervals.

"Look!" he said. "That is Zeebrugge. Beyond—that fainter light over there—is Ostend."

He consulted a roughly drawn map which he now produced, and which bore certain cryptic marks in red and blue; he directed Beryl's attention to a speck of light to the north, saying: "That surely is Heyst!"

Then he pointed "The Hornet's" nose

upwards, and rose until they were enveloped in a cloud of fog in order to evade the inquisitiveness of any searchlights, afterwards flying in a circle directly over the port of Zeebrugge, which both knew to contain strong defences and long-range anti-aircraft guns.

For a full quarter of an hour they hovered over the town, their presence entirely unsuspected on account of the roaring exhaust being silenced. Then, carefully, he once more descended to mark out his objective—the new German submarine base. Between two spots seen far below he was undecided. There were many faint lights burning in the town, but one, he decided, was in the centre of the submarine base.

Without uttering a word to his companion, who sat strapped in her narrow seat cramped, breathless, and half-frozen, he passed and re-passed over the German base three or four times.

Suddenly as he went a quick swish sounded below them, and, peering down, Beryl saw a big burst of flame, followed by a terrific explosion, the concussion of which gave the machine a serious tilt.

Bang!—bang!—*bang!* sounded so quickly in succession that hardly had one ceased before the other reached them.

Below, the bright red flashes, angry points of light in the blackness of the night, showed vividly, while at the moment that the searchlights shone forth Ronnie, having dropped his bombs, climbed swiftly into the bank of cloud.

Higher and higher they went, until below them they only saw the clouds aglow with the glare, whether by the incendiary fires they had caused among the enemy or the searchlights they knew not.

“ ‘ The Hornet ’ has done considerable damage this time ! ” Ronnie laughed hoarsely, as the altimeter showed that they were still ascending. “ I saw that the second bomb dropped plumb into the fitting-shop ! It has, no doubt, put an end to Fritz’s activity for a good many days to come.”

“ What do you intend doing now ? ” asked Beryl. “ Going home ? ”

“ Home ? No. I’ve got four more bombs for them, yet.”

As he spoke, however, they heard the sharp bark of the enemy’s anti-aircraft guns. Yet no shell whistled near them.

The Hun is a bully, and hence a coward. Taken unawares, as he was at Zeebrugge that night, when he heard nothing and saw nothing, it was but natural that he should fire even into the air in order to scare off the British raider.

But Ronald Pryor was not the man to be scared off. He had had an objective to reach and he had reached it, but he had not yet finished, and did not intend to take any bombs back.

He knew that as long as he kept above the low clouds, and as long as his machine was silent, as it would remain, it would be impossible for the gunners below to hit him. Therefore he drew away seaward again, according to his compass, then back to land, and for half-an-hour flew round the little town of Heyst.

Now and then, as they passed from one cloud to another, they watched the lights of Zeebrugge searching for them, until it seemed that the alarm had died down.

At two points, however, they could see great fierce fires burning—conflagrations they had caused in the heart of the submarine base. One

of Ronnie's bombs had, as was afterwards known, dropped upon the oil-tanks, and, the blazing oil having been scattered over a large area, had caused devastation throughout the neighbourhood.

"Hark! What's that?" asked Beryl holding her breath, her quick ears having detected a familiar sound.

Ronnie, listening, suddenly said:

"Ah! I quite expected that—their airmen are up, looking for us! Now we may have a little excitement. Collins put the gun ready. Is it all right?"

"Quite," said the girl. Long ago Ronnie had taught her how to manipulate the Lewis gun. Therefore, she placed her hand upon it and drew the shoulder-piece towards her, swinging the machine-gun easily upon its pivot.

"Keep cool, darling! Don't fire till I tell you," he urged. "We're going over the town again to give them a farewell salute—all explosives this time. I want to get those warehouses at the docks! I can see them plainly now—the fires show them up. By Jove, they'll get a shock when they find themselves bombed again, won't they?" and he laughed merrily as he turned "The Hornet's" nose back in the direction of Zeebrugge. Flying as low as he dared, he approached the spot where the red flames leapt up far below, and the smoke greeted their nostrils with increasing intensity.

By this time the searchlights had been switched off, though Hun machines could be heard in the air. Those who controlled the searchlights knew that their aeroplanes would work best in the darkness, being fitted with small searchlights themselves.

Leisurely, Ronnie came over the town, flying high and in silence, until, when just over where the darting flames were showing up the buildings all around, he suddenly released his remaining bombs—all but one.

Terrific explosions sounded in quick succession, and, though so far above, they could both feel the concussion. Indeed, "The Hornet" very narrowly escaped a serious nose-dive in consequence. Next moment they saw that the row of buildings facing the docks was aflame from end to end, and beginning to burn almost as fiercely as the submarine oil-dépôt.

Ronnie, however, did not have it all his own way.

Ten seconds after dropping those bombs, and causing panic in the occupied Belgian port, the sky was again ablaze with searchlights. At that moment Ronnie was out of one cloud, and travelling very swiftly into another.

The searchlights were, however, too quick for him, and picked him up.

"H'm!" he grunted. "They've found us at last! Now for home!"

Hardly had he spoken when the anti-aircraft guns from below commenced to bark sharply, with now and then a deep boom. They could both hear the shells whistling close to them, but so high were they by this time that accurate aim by the enemy was well-nigh impossible.

In such a circumstance the wisest course was to fly in a wide circle, descending and ascending, a course which Ronnie, expert airman that he was, adopted.

Those were highly exciting moments! Beryl held her breath. Her hand was upon the Lewis gun, but her lover had given no order. In her

observer's seat she sat alert, eager, with every nerve strained to its fullest tension. They were in the danger-zone, surrounded by what seemed a swarm of aeroplanes, which had ascended in order to prevent their returning to sea.

The little bulb in front of Ronnie burnt on, shedding its meagre light over instruments and maps. Beryl saw by the altimeter—which she had so often watched when flying the machine alone—that they were up five thousand six hundred feet.

The dark waters were beneath them. A stray shell from the enemy would cast them both down—deep down into the North Sea.

More than once they heard the whirr of an aeroplane-engine quite close to them, but going forward, slipping through the air without noise, thanks to Pryor's silencer, which the authorities had now recognised as a remarkable and highly useful invention in aerial warfare, they managed to evade their adversaries. The strain of it all was, however, terrible.

Upon the misty clouds below shone the glow of searchlights from land and sea, lighting up the billow mists, until they were quite picturesque undulations, like a fairy landscape. Yet through those mists they saw the deadly enemy flying to and fro in search of them as they went out to sea in silence.

Beryl watched it all from her observer's seat. She knew that their raid had been successful, and that enormous damage had been done to the Hun submarine base. On her left showed the faint lights of Ostend, where she had spent one summer with her sister Iris and her husband, two years before the war. She had walked along the Digue in a smart summer gown, and she had

gambled at *boule* and eaten ices in the great Casino which, according to report, was now used as a German hospital. Ah, how times had changed! She had never dreamt that she would be flying as an enemy over that sandy coast.

Ronnie, with all his wits about him, was heading straight for the English coast north of the Thames when, of a sudden, there arose from the dark void below the rapid throb of an enemy seaplane, which, a few seconds later, opened out its searchlight.

A moment afterwards it had fixed "The Hornet."

Then began a desperate fight for life. The German aviator, having marked his prey, rose like a hawk, and then bore down upon him swiftly, his searchlight glaring into Beryl's face like some evil eye.

The girl unstrapped herself and rose in order to be able to handle the machine-gun without encumbrance, for they were now flying upon an even keel.

"Hold on, dear!" the pilot exclaimed, and then suddenly he banked his machine over, swerving away none too soon from the hostile seaplane.

Again he worked up, avoiding the quick swoop of his adversary, who suddenly opened fire.

A heavy shower of bullets passed them harmlessly, whistling all around them, while from somewhere—possibly from a German warship—a high explosive shell burst perilously near them, causing "The Hornet" to roll and wallow in a most disconcerting manner.

Again and again Ronnie's adversary fired full upon him, but all to no purpose. Then

suddenly a second machine came up from some where, and that also let loose its machine-gun. Quick spurts of blood-red flame showed first upon one side then upon the other, yet Ronnie remained quite cool, awaiting his chance of gaining an advantage and to strike.

A piece of the high explosive shell had torn the fabric of one of the planes. That was all the damage they had sustained up to the present. Surely no woman could ever have a more exciting or so perilous an experience, midway between sky and sea !

Suddenly, after climbing and diving, Ronnie saw his opportunity, and, making a sudden swerve, cried to Beryl :

“ Get ready ! ”

“ I’m ready,” she answered.

Again he climbed, and as he rose past the machine which was pressing him so closely, he said :

“ Fire ! ”

In an instant Beryl’s gun spluttered, sending forth its leaden hail full into the centre of the German machine. Beryl held her breath, and watched the enemy’s searchlight quiver, rise, and then suddenly pointing downwards, swiftly become smaller and smaller as it descended towards the sea.

“ He’s gone ! ” cried Ronnie with relief. “ Pilot and observer both killed, I should say.”

“ They must have dropped into the sea ! ” gasped the girl, awe-stricken.

Next second, however, the other machine loomed up to exact vengeance. Beryl had swiftly replenished the gun with ammunition, and was again in readiness for the word from her lover to fire.

Ronnie, fully alive to the fact that he was being pressed by the second machine, dived and banked, then climbed as rapidly as he could, yet, alas ! he could not shake off his pursuer.

In silence, with the wind whistling through the struts and the piece of torn fabric flapping, he pressed on, striving to escape from his relentless pursuer, who, no doubt, intended to shoot him down as reprisal for the destruction of his Hun comrade.

Again the enemy machine opened out his searchlight, and, holding him as a mark, fired rapidly. For a moment Ronnie did not reply. All his nerve was concentrated upon obtaining the advantage a second time.

Up and down, to and fro, the two machines banked, rose and fell, but Ronald Pryor could handle his machine as though it were part of himself. At last he drew up, and, setting his teeth as he pointed "The Hornet's" nose direct at his adversary, he blurted out :

"Fire !"

Beryl laid the gun straight at the aeroplane, touched it, and again death rained forth.

Yet almost at that very same moment the Hun also opened fire. The spluttering was deafening for a few seconds, when, to the girl's alarm, she suddenly saw her lover fall helpless and inert over his instruments.

"Gad, Beryl," he managed to gasp, "they've got me—the brutes ! Phew, how it burns !"

The girl, who had not for a second lost her nerve, instantly realised the peril, and without a moment's delay—nay, even without a word—she clambered across into the pilot's seat and took the levers, being compelled to crush past her

wounded lover as she did so, and not knowing the nature of his wound.

"That's right, Beryl! Fight to the last!" the man gasped. "Bank her, then go right down and rise again. You may beat him off by that. Try, darling! Do—do your best!" he whispered, and then he sank back in the blackness of unconsciousness.

Beryl, as an expert air-woman, knew all the tricks of evasion while flying. She knew that her lover's advice was the best, and she carried it out to the very letter.

Just as she banked, the Hun machine sent out another splutter of lead. Those angry spurts of red fire seemed to go straight into her face, but, though the bullets tore more holes in the fabric of the left plane and broke a strut, they whizzed harmlessly past her.

It was truly a flight for life. Flying "The Hornet," as she was doing, she had no means by which to retaliate or to drive off the enemy. Their lives now depended upon her skill in manipulating the machine. This she did with marvellous judgment and foresight. To the very letter she carried out the orders of the man now lying back wounded and unconscious.

Beneath her breath she whispered a prayer to Almighty God for assistance, and set her teeth. Again the Hun seaplane spurted forth a venom of fire upon her, but with a dexterous turn she banked, and once more avoided him. He intended to shoot her down into the black waters below, but she had her wounded lover at her side, and thought only of his welfare. She recollected her own response when Ronnie had suggested that she should remain at home, and when she saw that cruel eye of bright light following

her so steadily she grew more and more determined.

At last she decided upon flying by the compass quite straight towards the Essex coast, and seeing if her adversary could overtake her. At first it seemed a very perilous course, because the Hun coming up behind, shot at her continually, and once more the fabric was torn in one place near her elbow. But as she flew on in silence she all at once made a discovery. She listened. Her pursuer was gradually overtaking her. If he did, then she was entirely defenceless, and must share the same terrible fate as the machine that Ronnie had sent down into the sea.

The tension of those fateful moments was terrible. Yet she summoned all her woman's pluck—the pluck that had come to the female sex in these days of war—and kept on flying in the direction of home.

Her ear caught something, for it was trained to the noise of aeroplanes.

Again she listened. That eye of light which was following her so ruthlessly was still upon her, yet by the noise, she knew that the hostile engine was not firing correctly. The throb was not even and incessant.

Had Providence intervened to save her ?

She drew a long breath, and opened out so that she put all speed into her machine. From the pace she was going she knew that the wind had sprung up, and in her favour, too. "The Hornet" was a fast machine, yet the Huns had machines quite as mobile, and she had no means of knowing the make of aeroplane against which her speed was pitted.

She flew—flew as no woman had ever flown

before. Half-crushed beneath her in the pilot's seat lay Ronnie, oblivious to everything. She had placed her arm tenderly round his neck, but on withdrawing her hand in the darkness she had felt it strangely sticky—sticky with blood!

Ronald Pryor was evidently wounded in the neck. Perhaps he was already dead. He might have been, for all the brave girl knew. But that sound of the mis-firing of her enemy gave her courage, and she kept on—on and on—until, very slowly, she drew away from that bright evil eye that was bent upon her destruction.

Again came a splutter of lead upon her. Again she knew that bullets had gone through the fabric, but no great damage had been done to the machine.

She feared more for the petrol-tank than for herself. A shot in the bottom of that tank would mean a certain dive into the sea. Of a sudden another spurt of fire showed deep below them, and a shell coming up from somewhere, friendly or hostile she could not tell, exploded, and nearly wrecked them both. It was from some ship at sea—a British ship, no doubt, which, seeing aircraft with a searchlight going in the direction of the East coast at that hour of the morning, had naturally opened fire upon it.

At last, after nearly half-an-hour, Beryl, still with her eye upon the compass and sailing again upon an even keel and in an increasing wind, glanced over her shoulder and saw the light of the enemy grow dimmer, and then gradually disappear. She had entered a thick cloud, and sailing on in silence, would, she knew, be at once lost to the view of her enemy.

Five minutes later, when Beryl at last realised that she had escaped, she again placed her left

arm tenderly round her lover and endeavoured to raise him, but without avail.

Was he dead? The thought struck her with horror! He had done what had been asked of him, but perhaps he, like so many others, had paid the toll of war!

Though perhaps her hand trembled a little upon the levers, yet she settled herself again as well as she could, and with her eye upon both map and compass she sped along over those dark waters, tossed by the increasing wind which had arisen behind her.

For nearly two hours she flew on. By dint of great effort she managed to move Ronnie into a position which she hoped might be more comfortable. She spoke to him, but there was no answer. He lay there inert and motionless, strapped in his seat. When she withdrew her ungloved hand it was again wet with blood.

She pressed forward, putting "The Hornet" along at the full pace of which the machine was capable. The little clock showed the hour to be nearly three, therefore she judged that she must be nearing the English coast again. Her surmise proved correct, for ten minutes later she saw the glimmer of a searchlight on the sky straight ahead—the light of one of our air-stations. Therefore, turning slightly to the north, she again opened the silencer as a precaution, and, with her engine suddenly roaring, made straight for it.

Ere long half-a-dozen beams of intense light were searching the skies for the incoming machine, which the watchers below were eager to examine, and it was not long before one of the beams caught and held "The Hornet" in its blinding rays, lighting up the white, inanimate face beside her, and showing the dark stain of wounds.

Then three other beams became concentrated for a few moments upon her, and again, one after another, shut off, until she was once more in darkness.

The position of the lights, however, told her where she was—over a certain town a few miles inland, and taking her bearings, she rose higher, and began to describe a wide circle in order to find the four bright flares which she knew Collins had lit in the meadow at Harbury.

Another half-hour she spent in vain search, until, of a sudden, she saw points of light deep down on her left. Straining her eyes she managed at last to make out that there were four, looking close together from that height. Therefore she quickly descended, while as she did so she saw Morse flashes from a signal-lamp telling her the direction of the wind, in order that she might land head on to it.

Ten minutes later she came safely to earth, when Collins ran up, having chased the machine across the field.

In a moment Beryl told him with breathless haste what had occurred, and with but few words they at once carried Ronald back to the house, and laid him upon the sofa in the study. Then Collins rushed to the car, and drove away madly to fetch the nearest doctor.

The latter arrived with but little delay, and Beryl, her sister's arm round her, stood outside the door, awaiting his verdict.

The examination occupied some time, but at last the medical man came forth.

"He is very severely wounded, Miss Gaselee," he said, "but there is still a spark of life left—a very meagre spark. By careful attention and nursing he may possibly pull through. He is

not yet conscious, but we will put him to bed, and I will remain and see what I can do. We can only hope."

Beryl, thankful that Ronnie still lived, quickly bestirred herself for his comfort, and it was not long before the senseless man was carried up to his own room, where the doctor remained watching him for many hours.

Days passed—days of breathless and terrible anxiety—during which the doctor forbade Beryl to see the wounded man. In the papers there had been published accounts of the enormous damage done to the enemy submarine base at Zeebrugge by a "British aeroplane," but the name of the intrepid aviator was not given. Only the authorities and those at Harbury Court knew the truth. The authorities preserved a wise reticence, for the publication of facts is not always in the interests of the country.

Ronnie's wounds proved far more serious than were at first believed, and even the specialist who came down from Harley Street was not at all hopeful of his recovery. Nevertheless, the fine physique of the patient proved in his favour, and a fortnight later Beryl was allowed to see him for the first time.

From that moment Beryl became his nurse, and slowly he recovered; slowly, because both his right arm and his right leg had been so injured that they would be entirely useless in future, and he could never fly again.

Only the thought of his invention, and the great advantage it would give to our aviators for night-flying in the future, comforted him, when at last he was able to be wheeled about in his chair by Beryl.

And was it surprising that when, three months later, the pair were married in the old, ivy-clad, church, half-a-mile from Harbury Court, the illustrated papers published a pathetic picture of the bridal couple emerging from the porch, the bridegroom on crutches, and described it as "a romantic war-wedding"?

THE END.

